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Fortitude - a novella by Andy Duncan

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My life started over on May 14, 1916, in a hut in the foothills of the Sierra Madre, between Rubio and San Geronimo, about 300 miles south of

El

Paso.

Pershing had put me in command of a party of twelve, sent to town in three

automobiles to buy maize for the horses. That accomplished, we devoted most of the day to my own project: We went looking for Villa's

lieutenant,

Cardenas. That's what brought us, eventually, to the hut, where we found,

not Cardenas, but -- I was informed -- his uncle.

"Por favor, Senor, por favor!"

In the thirty minutes since Private Adams had unsheathed his knife, we had

learned a number of things from this fat uncle: that he did not know any

Cardenas; that we were filthy American pigs; that he had not seen Cardenas

in months; that the merciful Jesus would save him; that the Americans should be crushed underfoot like lizards; that he had seen Cardenas a week

ago, but not since; that our fathers were bastards and our mothers, whores; and, again, that the merciful Jesus would save him. All this in Spanish, though these bandits could speak English as least as well as I could. Spanish seemed to be a point of honor with them. I respected that.

"Santa Maria!"

The man heaved and strained against his bonds, trying to avoid the knife.

His sweaty shirt pulled taut over his belly, and one button popped off to

fall onto the dirt floor. I picked it up, rubbed it between my fingers. Brass.

"Madre de Dios!"

At that moment, with a sudden, sickening exhilaration, I realized something. I knew I had held this man's button in my fingers before.

I'd

heard these squeals and bleats, seen my men's sunburned, darting scowls,

suffered the fried-bean-and-motor-oil stink of this miserable hut.

Since my youth I had been accustomed to sudden, vivid memories of lives in

other places, other bodies, other times -- memories that lingered, became

part of my present self. I still could taste the urine I was forced to drink from my helmet when I was dying of thirst for the glory of

Carthage;

it was brackish and sweet in the back of my throat, and as real as my mother's orange punch, gulped at the end of a day's sailing off

Catalina.

That son-of-a-bitch helmet -- it leaked like a sieve. But what I

relived

in that Mexican hut was not a life centuries removed. No, I relived a previous May 14, 1916, when I stood in the same hut, among the same

men,

holding the same button, and was the same person, likewise named George Smith Patton, Jr.

This was a first, a past life as myself. The initial disorientation passed, replaced by a giddy surge of confidence. I savored the moment. Would the feeling last longer than a second or two? It did. In fact,

the

memories became more complete, rushing into my head and filling it the

way

one's youth rushes back because of a piano tune, a whiff of gunpowder,

a

slant of light.

Some intellectual pissant would call this deja vu. Any soldier would

call

it intelligence, and act.

"That's enough," I said. I flicked away the button. "Let's go."

"What about this rat right here, lieutenant?"

I leaned over him, lifted his bloody chin. "You're a good man," I said into his face, in Spanish. "You have been very unhelpful. Carry on." I saluted him, and walked out.

As we waded into the broiling sun, wincing at the glare off the hoods

of

the Dodges, I said, "Son of a bitch should get a medal. Too bad he's

not

in a real army. Saddle up, boys." The auto sagged sideways as I

clambered

aboard. Waller spat on his hands and went to work on the crank.

"Where to, lieutenant?"

I could remember everything. Everything. I died at age 60 in a German hospital room, with tongs in my temples and fishhooks in my cheeks to

keep

my head from moving and crushing what was left of my spine --

No time for that.

"San Miguelito," I said.

"But lieutenant," Adams said, "that ranch has already been checked out. Cardenas ain't there."

"He's there now. Take my word for it, soldier. He's there." The Dodge farted and shivered and started to chug, and Waller jumped behind the wheel, shirt plastered to his back. I reached for my cigars as we

lurched

forward, tires spinning in the dirt. I knew the fat uncle would stagger

to

the door, rubbing his wrists and staring at us as we drove away, and

when

he did I waved and tossed him a cigar. Same as he had before, he just

let

it fall to the dirt. Lay there like a turd. Don't know when they've got

it

good, these Mexicans.

As we drove I remembered the gunfight that awaited us. I told the men exactly what to expect. They looked at me like I was crazy, but they listened. Hell, they were good soldiers. They didn't care whether I was crazy, they just wanted someone capable to tell them what to do. Before, there had been some question about who actually killed Cardenas

--

not in the papers, which gave me all the credit, of course, but in the ranks, since there was such a volley it was hard to tell whose .45 had

done the job. We hadn't even identified Cardenas until after it was all over. I'd wasted most of my bullets on some damn horse-rustling nobody. Not this time. If I had to live the next thirty years knowing I was doomed to a worse death than Hitler, then goddamn it, I was going to make use of my other knowledge, too. Shouting to the other cars as we drove along, I described Cardenas and his horse, and made it clear: He's mine. San Miguelito was just the same. Mostly. Same sun like a hot rough hand squeezing your temples. Same four bowlegged hombres outside the gate skinning a cow, hide coming off in jerks and pops. They didn't even look up when the shooting started, when the three riders burst out of the gate and tried to outrun the Dodges. That silver saddle made a damned impressive display. Hard to miss. I fired two shots, and he hit the ground like one of Caesar's winesacks.

"BANDIT KILLER," the headlines had said, and they'd say it again. As we searched the hacienda, Cardenas' wife and mother stood in the hallway beside a new Victrola and its crate, stared at us. The missus, about Beatrice's age, rocked a baby in her arms. As I passed, the granny spat on me. I shot the lock off the chapel door and kicked it in to find three old ladies praying in the corner, holding up their hands to God. No surprises ... although: Hadn't the baby been awake before? Now its bundled silence made me suspicious. "Excuse me, senorita," I whispered, as I gently pulled back the blanket. It was, indeed, a baby: little wrinkled face, thick black hair plastered over its forehead, sound asleep. I teared up. I always had a soft spot for babies. "Congratulations," I told its mama, and the baby's granny spat on me again. More guts than some American boys, sad to say. More guts than that yellow bastard in Sicily would have, so many years in the future.

There was one more difference at San Miguelito, a big one. Before, I had climbed onto the roof to make sure no one was waiting up there to ambush us as we left. No one was, but I stepped on a rotten place and fell through up to my armpits -- not a prime fighting position! Damned embarrassing, too. This time I walked a different route, gave the rotten place a wide berth, and kept an eye out for similar dark patches. I was so intent on not falling through that I let a gap-toothed Villista get the drop on me. He darted around a corner, pistol in hand, and Adams shot him almost before I could look up. As Adams searched the bandit's pockets, I stood there like a fool, dumbfounded for the first and last time in the Mexican campaign. "He wasn't supposed to be there," I said. "Rats're liable to pop out from anywhere," Adams said. He flipped a gold

piece into the air, caught it. "Good weight. Don't let it rattle you, lieutenant," he added, and I resolved to give him a week's latrine duty for that. In addition to his commendation, of course. Fair's fair. The rest went pretty much as before. As we drove off, about fifty Villistas came galloping up the ravine, and we fired a shot or two, but they didn't chase us far. Wasn't much of a race. God, the speed of the motored units to come! What Jackson could have done with them in the Shenandoah, I thought as dust billowed around me -- or Napoleon on the steppes! I rubbed my shoulder, remembered my last backward look at the torches and spires of Moscow, felt again the Russian numbness that

always lurked somewhere in my bones, even as my cheeks began to blister in this damnable Mexican sun. I tugged my goggles out a few inches and poked my face. Beneath my eyes was a sore borderline I could trace with my gloved finger. I let the goggles snap back into place. "Soldiers never fight where it's comfortable," I told Adams and Waller. "Think of all those Marines sweating it out in Haiti, or in Panama. Why, if they sent us to the French Riviera, it'd be a hellhole soon enough. How fast will this thing go, anyway?"

All the camp business faltered and got quiet as our little procession drove in. We took it slow, giving everybody plenty of time to look, and many fell in with us, walking alongside. Cardenas' lolling head on the hood seemed to return the soldiers' stares. By the time we hauled up the brakes and let the engines die in front of the command tent, dozens of doughboys were standing around, whistling and muttering the Old Man did it and nothing else I could hear. Two or three had potatoes and paring knives in hand. Never again, I thought, no more of that for me. Then Black Jack stepped out, standing ramrod straight as usual, a mustache for a mouth. The men and I stood in the autos and saluted, and then I stepped down and stood at attention and said, "We've brought in Cardenas, sir." Pershing nodded. "So you say, Lieutenant. Which?" I grabbed Cardenas by the hair and lifted. His eyes were black with blood, and his face was a little burnt from the hood. Pershing acted as if he didn't know what to do with his hands, finally put them behind his back and said, "Yes. That's him."

I let the head down gently so as not to dent the auto. Pershing looked at the other two bodies strapped across the other two hoods. He stepped a few paces toward the back of the automobiles and nodded when he saw the sacks of grain.

"General, there's a fourth bandit, but he's stowed in the back. No room, you see. He's the one who would have shot me, if Corporal Adams hadn't got him first."

Adams smiled and nodded, then looked mortified, as if he feared smiling and nodding were uncalled-for.

"Good job, Corporal, good job, Lieutenant, good job, all of you," Pershing said, turning back toward his tent. "I'm sure commendations will be in

order -- and if the Army gave medals for dramatics," he murmured as he passed me, close enough for me to smell the jalapenos on his breath, "then you'd certainly have a chestful of those, wouldn't you, Patton? Report after you bury them. And Patton -- you're lucky you remembered the maize."

How could a letter-perfect salute look so perfunctory? I stood at attention and held my salute as he stalked away. I had been thinking in the Dodge about the strange opportunity afforded me, and now I wondered again, as I watched my idol stride back into the command tent, why I had been given another chance. Did Pershing have anything to do with it? Did Villa? I thought not. Even in childhood I had been convinced that my destiny was to lead a great army in a great battle in a great war, perhaps even the greatest war in the history of the world. That had proven true once, and I believed it would prove true again. No, I knew my destiny would not be achieved on some dusty road in Mexico, chasing the minions of a murdering border bandit. My destiny lay where it always had lain, in Europe, against the Nazis. But how much could I change along the way, and could I change it for the better?

Pershing vanished into the shadowy triangle, and the flap snapped down. Behind me a Dodge backfired, and my head jerked as if struck: Mannheim, December 9, 1945. Hap Gay said, "Sit tight." At ten miles an hour, the loudest sound I ever heard. Silence. My head! Oh Jesus my back! The Cadillac's glass partition was spiderwebbed with gore. I sagged sideways, blood in my eyes, tried to wipe it away. Will it away. My arms wouldn't move. I couldn't sit up. My head lolled on Hap's shoulder. "Hell," I moaned. Drool on my chin. "Oh, hell."

The wind kicked up, blowing that acrid needling Mexican dust into my nose and throat. Coughing, I forced myself back to the present, back to Mexico, 1916, thinking: Even if I can't live a better life, I damn well can die a better death.

I dropped my salute, whirled, and bellowed for the ditchdiggers. Before, they had been found asleep in the back of the mess tent after a half-hour search. This time I had them front and center in five minutes flat, and they shouldered their shovels with wary glances, wondering how in the hell I knew.

That night, alone in my tent, I sat, knees wide apart, hunched over the upended trunk that served as a makeshift desk. I opened one of the tablets I'd been carrying since West Point: class notes, battle scenarios, quotes from Clausewitz, snatches of poetry, pledges to myself. "I hope I have got enough sence to be kiled in a great victory and be born between the ranks in a military funeral and morned by friend and foe alike," how old was

I

when I wrote that? Nineteen? Jesus God. I turned to a fresh page, creased the spine so that it would lie flat, daubed my pen in ink, and wrote a list.

Writing never had come easy for me, but I wrote without pause for a long time. I'd had all day to think about what I would do, what I would change.

The list almost filled the page. When I couldn't think of anything else,

when I could avoid it no longer, I sighed and wrote at the top:

DECEMBER 9, 1945

KAFERTAL. OUTSIDE MANNHEIM

Then I circled it. I stopped, pen suspended. What could I add to that? "Look out for the truck!" or something equally inane? Just avoid the

damn intersection altogether, Georgie. Hell, don't take a trip at all that day.

The ink on the pen nib beaded, bulged. I dared it to fall. Thirty goddamn

miles per hour. Not a soldier's death at all. I moved the pen to the right

just before the drop let go. I heard it dot the trunk. Perfectly easy to

avoid, really. Maybe the easiest thing on the list.

I heard something behind me: a faint scrambling, tiny claws on canvas.

I

set down my pen and reached for my knife. At night the desert creatures sought warmth and shelter. There, at the edge of the lamplight, a tail. Well, well, another Gila monster wanted to bed down with old Georgie. As

I

aimed, the tail stopped moving, as if the lizard knew what was coming. Tail looked to be about three inches -- that meant the head would be

just

about -- there. I threw the knife and the tail spasmed, lay still. I carried over the lantern, lifted the little bastard by the hilt of the knife (how its scales shine in the light, it's almost pretty), carried

it

to the tent flap, and flicked it outside with the others. Setting the knife aside to clean later, but not too far out of reach, I sat again

on

the rickety cot, picked up the pen. Hmm. Must be something else to

list.

Must be. But it was a damn good life the first go-round, wasn't it, Georgie? Hell of a good time. Look at that knife, would you. Not proper blood at all. More like some sort of oil, clotted with sand. Damned scuttling nuisances. Five since Tuesday, all out front in a little ant-teeming pile. They were only lizards, but you'd think they would learn.

I miss that Mexican campaign. Hell, I miss all the campaigns. So many battles worth fighting again.

"Isn't that right, Willie? Willie."

Damn dog can't sit still two minutes without sleeping, even in the damp and miserable Limey outdoors. Didn't they teach him any discipline in

the

R.A.F., before his owner got shot out of the sky?

"Willie!"

I tap him with my crop. He looks up and yawns.
"Look alive, Willie. God knows we need some signs of life around here."
I tug the leash and he flops to his feet, raises one leg and waters the
tread of a tank. The balsa wood darkens and streaks. "Good dog, Willie."
So many great battles, great campaigns.
Enemy scouts rustled in the hillside firs as I splashed my face and
head
with the cold foam of the rushing Rhine and stood up grinning, slinging
droplets to left and right, daring some filthy goatherd to draw his bow
against me, against Caesar, against Rome...
The pipes wailed like our women and the mud gripped my toes as the
clans
marched across the sodden moor, pacing off the minutes until we could
lift
our swords and shed our blood for the one true king of Scotland...
My granduncle put his callused hand in mine as we charged side by side
and
whooping across the northernmost ground claimed by the Seventh
Virginia,
hearing nothing but our blended gasping voices and the rush of tall
grass
against our legs before we leapt as one over that last stone wall --
God, that death was good!
But this is not Gaul, not Culloden, not Gettysburg. It's the first thing
I
wrote down, back in my tent in Mexico, the chief thing -- besides the
obvious -- that I wanted to avoid: FORTITUDE.
But here I am. Stuck here in England once again, a puppet commander of
a
paper army, mounting a phantom invasion out of canvas and paint.
Willie depleted, he and I step into the road, lined for a hundred yards
in
both directions with facing rows of dummy tanks. Shermans, mostly. We
stand there, all alone, blinking at the sunset. This has been one of
those
endless Limey midsummer days, when everybody but me looks up at the sun
and pretends the day is over and retires for drinks and din-nah, with
teatime still lead in their guts. What a place. Even the nights are
fake.
Over my head is one of the 75-millimeter-sized "guns." I grab it with
both
hands and squeeze. It's Ike's neck, and Hitler's too. The tin buckles
with
a plank. When I let go, the barrel is crooked. Those few inches off
true
would be enough to send a shell a dozen yards wide of the enemy. If
there
were a shell. If there were an enemy.
"Dammit, Georgie, of course there's an enemy," I say aloud.
Willie snorts and wags his tail and nuzzles my jodhpurs. "Want to kill
some Nazis, boy?" I scratch rough between his ears. "Want to kill some
krauts?"
He lolls on his side and twitches one hind leg as I rub his belly.
"Well, first we've got to sit here awhile. We've got to play pretend.
Yes
we do we do we do. We're just having a good time, a good good time,
aren't
we Willie, playing with our toys, playing war in our cold wet sandbox?
Goddamn Eisenhower."
I stand and kick a splintered dent in the front of a tank. Its walls

sway

in and out, back and forth, like a tent in a sandstorm.

"If he thinks old Georgie is going to sit out Overlord a second time in this purple-pissing Limey Hooverville, well, then, Ike has another -- "

"Be careful with the armor, please, General Patton, we've had rather a shortfall of nails."

A tall, short-haired woman stands behind me, smiling. I don't know her. She wasn't here before. No matter; that's increasingly common. No cause for alarm, no threat to my destiny. Brit, of course. Posture good.

Uniform

not regulation, but close: khaki shirt, khaki slacks, boots, a dark

brown

jacket with a military cut, a knotted scarf where a man would wear a necktie. Bare-headed, though, goddamn it. Helmet hangs from her belt, along with a host of tools and implements, none regulation. She laughs.

"Please don't be embarrassed, General. In the cinema we all talk to ourselves. It's the best rehearsal." She sticks out her hand. "I'm Madeleine Thomson -- Maddy, on the set. I'm pleased to meet you."

I don't take her hand. I don't smile or speak. I square my shoulders. I look her in the face, glance down at her helmet, glance at the top of

her

head, and look her in the face again. I make a low throat-clearing

noise,

and Willie growls.

After a pause, the woman blinks, sighs, detaches the helmet and sets it

on

her head, practically covering her eyes. A size too big, at least; slackness in the quartermaster's office again. Then she salutes, and I salute in return. Hers is pretty sloppy -- head bobs sideways to meet

the

hand, forearm is at a definite angle, and she drops it a good second before I drop mine -- but I'm willing to make allowances, in the name

of

Anglo-American relations. Hell, I won't even bawl her out for the

helmet.

I'm a regular Cordell Goddamn Hull.

"At ease, Miss Thomson," I tell her. "You may say hello to Willie, if

you

like."

The little bastard is snuffling up to her feet and whining and wagging

his

whole behind. She gives me a dirty look and squats to rub the dog's

neck,

the tools on her belt rattling and jingling.

"My mum has a bull terrier. Ugly little buggers, aren't they? This

one's

friendly, though. A British dog, General?"

"Willie's an inheritance," I say. "His owner was a pilot."

She keeps looking at the dog, though her chin moves as if she almost glanced up. "Didn't make it, eh? Well, I'm sorry for you, Willie." He wallows, ecstatic, as she scratches his belly with increasing violence.

"But you've found someone else. That's the important thing." She pats

his

flank, stands, yanks a hammer from her belt, and begins to pound the

tank

gun back into place, words coming out through clenched teeth as she

flails

away. "That's what a lot of us will have to do before this war's over, Willie -- find someone else."

I clear my throat. "Believe it or not, Miss Thomson, that helmet could

save your life one day. Bombs could start falling on this base any
time.
Real bombs," I add, glancing at the slapped-together monstrosities all
around. Before, there had been no bombs, but wouldn't do to let Thomson
know that. Bad for discipline.
"Things have been remarkably quiet thus far, General. I've had closer
calls in Birmingham repertory."
"That could change in moments, Miss -- I'm sorry, Miss Thomson, I don't
know what to call you. I don't know your rank."
"My title at Shepperton Studios," she says, delivering one last hammer
blow, "is second-unit production coordinator." She steps back to study
her
handiwork. The gun is now visibly battered, but unbowed.
I wave my crop. "But you're in charge of all the Shepperton people on
this
site?"
She returns the hammer to her belt, hitching at her pants as she
secures
it. "All the carpenters, designers, painters, seamstresses -- yes,
General, to the extent they can be commanded at all, I have that
singular
honor. And may I add, General -- " She folds her arms and glares. " --
that despite the extraordinarily short notice, the dreary
accommodations,
the dearth of materials, the miserable weather, the inadequate
blueprints,
and the constant meddling memos from headquarters and from
Intelligence,
my people have done a bloody good job, for which they've received no
official recognition whatsoever except the heel of your boot and the
lifted leg of your, your, familiar, but I, for one, am quite proud of
this
-- what's the phrase, General? -- purple-pissing Limey Hooverville."
Now this is new. Before, my Shepperton liaison during the winter of '43
and '44 was a hangdog little Cockney fellow with less backbone than a
Cornish pasty. I feel a ridiculous stab of optimism, a joy almost
painful,
like a bullet. I make myself scowl anyway. I slap my boot, once, with
my
riding crop. The woman stands a little straighter, slightly widens her
eyes, but doesn't look away, and keeps glaring. I'll be damned. Maybe I
can turn this sorry-ass assignment around.
But then I feel a wave of weariness (even as I put my fists on my hips
and
hunch my shoulders and brace my legs, my prime chewing-out stance), and
I
think, you're no longer that young man in Mexico, Georgie. The changes,
my
God, they get harder and harder. Sicily was the last time I even
bothered
to try, and look how that turned out. So tired. So old.
But still the boss of this goddamn outfit.
"I'm not accustomed to being spoken to that way, Miss Thomson, by any
American below the rank of colonel, or by any Brit below the rank of
prime
minister."
Jaw a little tighter, she holds her ground. Damn. Lucky thing I'm not
cheating on Beatrice anymore.
After a pause, I add, "So I suppose I'll have to call you Colonel, at
least. At ease, Colonel Thomson."

I turn and kick another hole in the tank. The whole contraption shudders, but stays intact.

"So far so good," I say, turning back to her and smiling for the first time. "I do commend you and your crew, Colonel, for making a damned good start on this thing. But we have a lot left to do, a hell of a lot. When's the tour?"

She blinks. "The tour."

"You are no doubt aware, Colonel, that I am here for a guided inspection tour of Fortitude headquarters."

She looks at her watch. "And you are no doubt aware, General, that you were not expected until nine o'clock -- " She catches my glance. " -- Ah, bloody hell -- oh nine hundred hours tomorrow morning."

"I'm impatient. But I am here, and I am at your disposal, Colonel, so please show me this magnificent deception of yours."

She sighs, grins, shakes her head, plucks a large flashlight from that amazing belt -- could that be a holster? Must make a note of how that thing is put together. Tank crews could use something like that.

"Well," she says, "I suppose Agatha Christie won't solve the case while I'm away. Do you care for murder mysteries, general? Or do you get enough of killing on the job? This way. Down the column."

Willie scampers ahead, sniffing at the painted treads. The tanks loom on either side, their bulks somehow more realistic in the darkness. I almost could convince myself -- no, no I couldn't, it's gone. Not now. The gravel beneath our boots is a good sound, a soldier's sound. Set a smart pace on gravel, and you sound like you're really going somewhere. Thomson sets a smart pace.

"So," I say, "what do you think of the boys at headquarters?"

Crunch, crunch.

"Let me put it this way, General. On a film set, I wouldn't entrust them with a clapper board. The injuries could be frightful."

"I don't allow officers to mince words with me, Colonel. You must speak freely and frankly."

"General, they are ignoramuses."

"I believe the phrase you're groping for, Colonel, is goddamn worthless ignoramuses, but you're definitely on the right track. Listen, Colonel --

I'm not sure what you've been told or not told, but if I'm going to be even the figurehead in charge of this fake invasion, then that makes you one of my people, and I don't like for my people to be in the dark about their duties. Do you have any questions for me that the lords of St. James have not satisfied?"

"I do, General." She stops and switches off the flashlight. All around us,

in the absolute darkness, the base strains toward battle. In the pregnant silence I hear a crewman, his final inspection complete, shinnying out of

a hatch and dropping to the ground -- or is it just a garter snake? "We are told that so far, the Germans seem to be taking the bait. They genuinely believe that East Anglia is a staging area for a great cross-Channel invasion, aimed at Calais and led by you. Is that true, General? Have my people helped convince the Nazis this absurd story is real?"

Absurd -- let that pass. "You have, Colonel, you have." I hope she can't tell that my eyes are closed. The breeze carries the smell of cordite, boot polish, sweat. "You have indeed convinced the krauts. But now you have a harder job. Now you have to convince me."

The tanks weren't moving, and so I had no choice but to find out why. "Goddamn it, what's the holdup back here?"

Despairing that I ever would be heard over the artillery and the machine guns and the engines, I half-strode, half-slid down the pulverized sod of the hillside and regained my balance on the edge of the trench where the

whole ragged tank column, Renaults and Schneiders alike, had come to a halt. As I stood there weaving, pistol in one hand and walking stick in the other, I heard my batman, Private Angelo, reach my side, gasping; a strong lad, but I could outrun him any day.

Beneath me, several dozen infantrymen huddled in the ditch, arms over their heads. Their shovels lay every which way, like scattered kindling.

As I stood there, aghast, a shell blew several feet from me, spewing a gout of mud that splattered down on us all. I didn't flinch. I had expected it.

It was 10 a.m. on September 26, 1918, at the start of the Meuse-Argonne offensive. We were about 625 yards south of the village of Cheppy. If I acted as I had before, in about 45 minutes I would take a bullet in my left upper thigh, a life-threatening wound, and would lie suffering in

a shell hole for two hours before being rescued; and so my Great War would end, and I'd be sent home to Beatrice for many years to come. I knew all this. And all morning, all week, all month, I had pondered what

I might do differently to avoid this calamity. Giving up my tank command was out of the question; it would leave a greater scar on my career than any bullet. Ignoring this holdup in the column, too, was impossible; our men needed relief, and fast. No, I knew that I had played a crucial role

at this location, at this time. How could I be elsewhere? I was an officer. I had to do my duty.

Mouth dry at the thought of that oncoming bullet, I shook my head, raised my walking stick, and drummed on the steel plates of the nearest Schneider. "Let's get this column moving," I bellowed. "These tanks are needed up there in the field, not sitting in a goddamn ditch."

The hatch flung open, and out leaned a greasy-faced soldier with a big
chew inflating his cheek. "Colonel, if somebody don't dig us a path
through this trench, we ain't going nowhere." Bullets stitched the side
of
the tank in a diagonal. "Jesus!" the tank man cried, and ducked inside.
"We tried to dig 'em out, Colonel," one of the men in the trench called
up, "but then the krauts got us pinned down."
"Pinned down, shit. You don't see them shooting me, do you? Where are
your
officers?"
"Dead, Colonel."
"You've got a new one, then. Come on, boys," I yelled. I holstered my
pistol and picked up a shovel, held it out. "The sooner we dig a path
for
these tanks, the sooner we all can get out of here."
Slowly, the man who had spoken reached up and took the shovel from my
hand, holding it as if it might explode.
"Come on, goddamn it," I cried again, holding out another shovel.
"Let's
get a move on. You don't have to dig the Panama Canal." Just as a
soldier
reached for the shovel, a bullet hit the blade, knocking it out of my
hand. The soldier drew back with a cry. "Never mind that," I said,
grabbing another shovel from Angelo, who was stacking his arms with
them.
"A lucky shot, that's all. No Buffalo Bills over there. They haven't
got
our range yet."
"Tell that to Phillips," the soldier said, snatching the new shovel
from
my hand. A dead man lay a few feet away, his eyes and mouth open, his
arms
still wrapped around his shovel. The soldier who had spoken glared at
me
and fell to, digging like a madman. Good. Bravery works, and honor, but
so
do spite, and hatred.
"You'll all die like Phillips if we don't get this column moving," I
said.
By now Angelo was distributing shovels at a frantic pace; as I
expected,
the men were glad to have something to do, something other than panic.
I
stepped over to Phillips, tugged free his shovel, and offered it to a
man
beneath me, the last man to huddle against the trench wall, eyes wide.
"Come on, son. Take the shovel. Finish what Phillips started."
No reaction.
"Take the shovel, goddamn it!"
He gave his head two sideways jerks -- shaking it, I presume.
"Take the shovel, you miserable son of a bitch, or by God I'll kill you
myself," I cried, as I swung the shovel sideways, like a baseball bat,
and
slammed the side of his helmet. He howled and fell over, arms over his
face. I raised the shovel high over my head, and he held out his hands
and
gibbered:
"I'll do it! I'll do it! Just hand me the shovel, Colonel, I'll do it!"
I
swear."

"Good man," I said, and dropped the shovel into the dirt at his feet. I turned away, faced the reassuring geometries of the tank column, watched the bullets ricocheting off their iron flanks. Rotten coward. Would I have killed him? Didn't matter; the decision hadn't been necessary. He had done his duty. But what of my duty?

"Get these wagons ready to move!" I shouted, rapping on the side of each tank as I strode past. I rapped harder and harder as I went, shouted louder and louder, tried to clear my mind so that, when necessary, I could act without thinking, act like a soldier.

When the column started moving again, Private Angelo and I had an awful time ordering the infantrymen to march alongside. They knew the tanks would draw all sorts of enemy fire, including artillery.

"Sitting ducks, hell! That's what you'll be if you stay here. Not only are these tanks going to clean out those kraut nests that are picking you off, but these tanks are, furthermore, your only real cover, and as you can see -- " I waved my stick at the Renault rumbling past. " -- that cover is on the move. So let's get going, and I mean now! Fall in! Follow me!"

So many back-of-the-line command-post generals never realize that on the battlefield, the most effective order is "Follow me!" Those ashen-faced troops put their heads down, shouldered their shovels, and trudged along behind me, hoping against hope I knew what I was doing.

Before, that hope had been sorely misplaced. We had been marching to the left of the column, and had been cut to pieces by machine-gun fire. But staying in that damn trench, in the middle of hostile territory, was just not an option. So this time I led the men to the right of the column, and hoped that even if I weren't spared, this time at least most of them would be.

As soon as we set off, I felt a new anxiety clutching me, not fear, exactly -- no, that had been with me for weeks, and was still there, and growing, and I hated it -- but a sort of fresh overlay of nausea, of uneasiness, a feeling not that something bad was going to happen but that everything was already bad, and I just didn't realize it, though at any moment I might, and then choke on the newfound ugliness of the world. I was attempting to change the day's outcome, of course. But I hadn't felt this way in Mexico, or in the months since, despite occasional ... adjustments. What was different? I picked my way more carefully through the sucking soil of the battlefield. There was an ache in my joints, a seemingly sourceless pang like the one in the jaw that steals up on you, gradually pulses the news that while asleep you've been grinding your teeth.

We walked. How much time had elapsed? Two minutes? Three? How much time

did I have left? Up ahead, one of the Schneiders met a 150-millimeter shell and blew up with a sound like a rifle-shot pumpkin. Flaming shards twinkled down on us, and the heat seared my face. But we kept walking, and the column kept rolling forward, detouring around the flaming wreck -- that tight turning radius was serving us well today -- rumbling ahead, guns firing, bullets pinging off the sides and whining past. Each time I glanced around, Private Angelo and the others were still in line, though each time the line was a man or two fewer; and so I soon stopped glancing around. I tried to refocus my thoughts enough to be proud of those tank boys. I remembered my final orders to them: Remember that you are the first American tanks. You must establish the fact that AMERICAN TANKS DO NOT SURRENDER. As long as one tank is able to move it must go forward. Its presence will save the lives of hundreds of infantry and kill many Germans. Surely I should have been shot by now. Had I changed my destiny? Merely by walking on the right rather than the left? Was war that meaningless? I refused to accept it. Suddenly I knew: I was going to be shot, no matter what I did. But when? "Strange clouds, Colonel," Private Angelo said. I looked up into that sky and saw ranks upon ranks of soldiers, their shapes outlined like those of men standing a distance away in fog, their faces indistinct and unreadable. Yet I knew who they were. They were my grandfather, my granduncle, and all the soldiers in our line, and all the soldiers who, at one time, I had enjoyed the honor of being. They had looked down on me that other Sept. 26, moments before I was shot, and they had given me a feeling of great satisfaction, a certainty that I was doing as they would have done, and that whatever happened, I was a true soldier, a man, a Patton. But now, looking up at those ghostly ranks, I felt only a tautness in my gut, a parched mouth, and shame. "Angelo," I barked. "Sir?" "Maintain the march." Without looking behind, I darted between two of the tanks, emerged on the left side of the column. Head down and pistols drawn, I sprinted alongside, outrunning the tanks, teeth bared, looking only at the soupy, pockmarked, bone-and-metal-glinting mud beneath my feet, refusing to look into the sky again until -- and then came the bullet like a fist to my left leg, and though I staggered on another forty feet I knew I was down. I managed to holster both pistols before my wounded leg planted itself in the mud like a post and jerked me to a stop, forcing me to pivot and topple in a slow spiral until I was face down in the flesh-smelling sludge. No pain, not yet, not in the leg. I heaved

myself onto my back, spat dirt, and glared at the empty khaki sky.
"Hatred works, too," I said, and blacked out.
I came to just as a long white bone, a femur I think, moved past my
eyes,
followed by a canteen, several rocks, a mound of something rotten, and
a
brick-colored puddle that was rushing to refill itself, having just
been
disturbed by something, perhaps a foot. I couldn't breathe. I was
upside
down, bent double. Someone was carrying me on his shoulder. Then I
remembered.
"Angelo," I said.
"Almost there, Colonel," he said. Still no pain, though I could feel
nothing, move nothing, could barely lift my head. Now I was looking into
a
big shell hole, maybe ten feet across and five feet deep, and the
bottom
of it was rising to meet me. Then I saw the damnable sky again, and
Angelo
was laying me down at the foot of the hole, trying to straighten me as
best he could, which wasn't very straight. When he quit fussing, I was
half sitting up like a sultan taking his ease, the back of my head
pillowed by a tuft of needle grass.
"The tanks," I said.
"Still moving," he said.
I coughed. "The men."
He looked away. "Sit tight, Colonel," he said. "Once the tanks have
shut
off those machine guns, they'll be back for us."
He meant, they're all dead. "Not back," I said. "Forward." Then I
blacked
out again.
When next I awoke, the first person I saw, standing atop the thrown-up
dirt at the lip of the hole, wearing his awful plaid weekend jacket
over
his slate-colored courthouse uniform of vest and baggy trousers, was my
father, who was transparent but aglow within, like a reconnaissance
balloon. Papa was looking into the hole with a slight frown, vexed, as
if
he'd mislaid his glasses again. He loomed over Private Angelo, who lay
on
his belly and sighted along his rifle into the smoke.
I expected Papa to start patting his pockets. Instead he saw me,
smiled,
and punched the air with his walking stick by way of greeting. "Tell me
something, Georgie," he called. As he headed my way, he stepped on
Private
Angelo's back; his foot just seeped in, then reappeared, whole. As Papa
stepped into the pit he darkened considerably, and I saw his inward
glow
had merely been a flare guttering down the sky, briefly visible through
his chest. "I'm curious. And think it over carefully before you
answer."
Having reached the bottom, he sat on nothing and leaned back with his
fingers together, as he always did at his desk in the study at Lake
Vineyard. "Do you ever -- how shall I put it? I want to speak
precisely,
now. See people who aren't there? Images from the past, or of the
future?"

He leaned over to where his desk drawer would be, pulled on it, made familiar motions with his empty hands. "Drink, Georgie? No, of course not.

Ah." He smacked his pale lips. "There's profit in grapes, but more character in grain. Visions, Georgie. There, I said it. Fine
Episcopalian

I am, eh, to be talking about visions. Do you believe in visions, Georgie?"

"Paralyzed" isn't the term; rather, I felt as if I had nothing left to move. I sensed, rather than felt, my life ebbing away through my wound, somewhere out of sight but vital, as a child senses his parents' despair.

Yet I seriously considered Papa's question, even as I watched through his vest a rat that clawed out of the dirt, looked around, then scrambled back out of sight, long tail whipping about beneath Papa's watch fob. I felt I had been given a trick question, the kind that tormented me at West Point.

Papa kept rocking back and forth, but without the comforting squeal of his chair. I missed it. I missed him. Sixteen months since I had waved to him

on the dock from the Governor's Island ferry. Finally I said: "I believe in you, Papa."

He chuckled, nodded. A mortar exploded nearby. "Jesus!" cried Angelo, and

clouds rained down as Papa said: "Good answer, Georgie. But do you know, I never had visions myself. Never. Not even as a child, after the war, when

I almost died with the typhoid. All I could envision then was the pitcher

of water across the room, and that was certainly real, because I crawled across the floor and pulled it over on top of myself, didn't I?" He chuckled and rubbed the palms of his hands along his thighs, patted his knees.

Private Angelo slid down the crumbling slope on top of Papa, then crawled

through him and leaned over me, examining my eyes and face.

"Now, other people in the family have seen them," Papa said. "You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, Papa," I said.

"Sorry, Colonel," Angelo said. "Can't understand a word you're saying. Follow my finger with your eyes, Colonel. OK? Please, Colonel."

"Why, Georgie, your step-grandfather, Colonel Smith, told me that once as

he was walking through a hotel lobby in Sacramento, he heard a dance in progress behind a closed door, and was drawn to open the door and look in

-- curiously drawn, he said, because he was not a prying man, as you know,

Georgie. He was the very figure of a Virginia gentleman, was your step-grandfather."

"Shit," Angelo said, wiped his mouth, and scrambled back up the slope, kicking through Papa's head as he went.

"And he found that ballroom filled, Georgie, with officers in

Confederate

uniform, and their women and servants, all in the dress of a generation before." Papa again made familiar motions, drank the air. "Excuse me,"

he

said, covering his mouth and puffing his cheeks. "And the Colonel found himself in the middle of the room, and everyone had fallen silent, even the musicians, and one of the violinists -- the Colonel would never

forget

this -- was scratching his nose with a bow. What a thing for him to notice, Georgie, in the circumstances!" A splatter of guns and some not-so-distant shouts briefly drowned his voice as he examined his

string

tie. " -- stood there as each of the officers in the room passed before him in silence, single file, to bow and shake his hand and look him in

the

face, and he recognized each man in turn as a man who had served under

him

in the Shenandoah, and died there. Died there, Georgie."

"Hail Mary, full of grace," said Angelo, from the edge of the pit.

"But he wasn't afraid, Georgie. And when he came to himself, why, he

was

out in the lobby again, leaning against a wall and staring into a spittoon. A colored man asked him if the Colonel was all right. 'All right?' he replied. 'Why, this is the most honored day of my life.'

Papa

chuckled and hitched up his trouser legs as he rocked backward and

rubbed

the side of his face, no doubt because the sun was high and hot through the study window that looked out onto the vineyards. No doubt Papa soon would reach up and pull the shade. "Now, you don't have to tell me a thing, Georgie, you never did," he continued, "but I've seen a certain look on your face many a time. Do you remember how Polvo used to jump

up

from the rug and look at something that wasn't there, and growl? That's the look I mean, Georgie, only you don't growl."

Private Angelo suddenly was at my side again, this time muttering and fussing with my leg, I suppose, though I saw only the top of his helmet and his mud-encrusted shoulders moving. I could look only at Papa.

Angelo

straightened, ripping a long strip of white fabric from a roll, then ducked again, muttering. "Jesus God. Hold on, Colonel. This'll be over in

a

sec."

"Just look at me, Papa." I tried to laugh. Angelo reached up to my face and daubed at my lips with a handkerchief. "Look at me. Lying helpless

in

the goddamn mud."

Papa stiffened, brought his invisible chair back down to all fours with

a

thunk I could almost hear. "No public man uses coarse speech, Georgie." I flushed -- the first sensation I had felt since the shot, hot and

full

in the face. "No, sir."

"Helpless," Papa said, and looked away from me. Crawling through him, Private Angelo knelt at what might have been the corner of the study, tugged at his pants, and began to piss, splattering the dirt and himself.

"Papa, I couldn't even walk to the foxhole! The private here had to

carry

-- " Papa looked back at me, stern. "Had to drag me," I finished.

Angelo moved well away from his muddy pissoir and sat in the dirt, arms

clasping his knees, chin resting on arms, staring at me.
"Hold on, Colonel," Private Angelo whispered.
"Papa," I said. "Papa, I've been here before."
His eyes narrowed, and he leaned forward. "What's that, Georgie?"
"Here, in this shell hole. Years before. I'm doing it all over again,
Papa, everything. I don't know whether it's my will or God's will or
fate,
but -- I've got another chance, Papa."
"Another chance," Papa said, rubbing his chin and looking up, toward
the
east. His face flickered with reflected gunfire.
Private Angelo rubbed his face and muttered, "Christ Almighty, I bet
they're ice fishing at home."
"You know, I was almost a soldier once, Georgie ... more than thirty
years
ago."
"You were a soldier, Papa. You commanded 'A' Company at VMI. You led
the
cadets in Philadelphia, at the centennial parade."
Now Papa and Angelo talked at once, only not quite. They paused between
sentences, and overlapped their speeches only slightly, so that the
effect
was of two impatient, self-centered people having a conversation, or of
one person speaking and the next person, translating. Papa was a
trained
public speaker, and was telling a story long familiar to both of us,
but
Angelo was halting, less sure, speaking mostly to himself.
"Parades. That's not soldiering, son. Before you were born, before I
met
your mother, I signed up to join the Hicks Expedition, to fight in the
Sudan against the Mahdi."
"You know what everybody in the unit says about you, Colonel? I'll tell
you. We think you're the all-time eternal brass-plated bastard from
hell."
"I read in the papers they were recruiting in Los Angeles, and during a
recess in yet another interminable civil case I told my second to
resume
without me if I was delayed, and I trotted downstairs and ran down the
street, coattails flying, to the hotel listed in the ad."
"But you know what else we say about you, Colonel? We tell all the
other
guys that you're our bastard, and furthermore we all think you're a
damn
good soldier."
"The recruiters had a suite with a potted date palm in the middle of
the
floor. 'Didn't know the dashed things grew here naturally,' the
sergeant
said. He had one leg, and a chipped front tooth. 'Might have saved some
money on the passage, what, if we'd left that bastard in Cairo.' I
laughed
and shook everyone's hand. They called me pasha Patton, which is a
title
of great respect in Egypt, you know."
"You ain't gonna die this way, Colonel. Not if we can help it. Not if I
can help it."
"Oh, I signed my name to everything, I did. When I came home that
evening
the family met me at the door, saying Mama had fallen again, and before

I

hung up my hat and cane I knew that I would never go."

"I ain't leaving you, Colonel. I'll wait on our boys, or the Germans, whichever comes first."

"At Kashgil, that November, Hicks was ambushed, and the expedition was wiped out very nearly to the last man. I read the news on the

streetcar,

headed for yet another victory dinner for President Cleveland."

I coughed. "That was good luck, wasn't it, Papa?"

"Don't try to talk, Colonel. Want some water?"

"Yes, they were lucky, son. They died like your grandfather, and your granduncle. They died like men."

"Here you go, Colonel. Have a drink. That's right."

I spluttered. "No, Papa. I mean, it was good luck for me. Papa -- what

if

you had died?"

"Hm? Oh, of course, Georgie, of course you're right. I have no regrets. I've been blessed with a wonderful family, Georgie, and a wonderful son.

A

son who's making the most of his big chance." He leaned forward and

patted

my leg, and I felt pain such as I had never known. I screamed.

"Christ! Colonel, shut up, sir," Private Angelo said, lunging toward me. My father was getting up, patting his pockets, preparing to leave.

"Papa!"

I cried. "Papa!"

"Geez, he wants his old man now. Listen, Colonel," Private Angelo whispered into my ear, "you've gotta hold out just a while longer, and

lay

low and be quiet, you got me? We ain't got a hell of a lot of friends

in

this neighborhood, you know?"

"Papa," I said, my leg throbbing, my forehead sizzling. Papa was making his way over the lip of the hole, rubbing the small of his back. He

looked

back at me as Angelo upended his canteen over my face, blurring the slope-shouldered outline of the only Patton I had ever known.

I heard Papa's voice: "Another chance. Imagine that. Well, Georgie,

maybe

that's true for you. I hope it is. I hope it is true for one of us ...

"

His last words were swallowed by the spitting rumbling grind of tank engines, and by the shouts of what sounded like a thousand men.

"We're done for, Colonel," Private Angelo said, still swabbing my face. Up on the crest behind him, where Papa had stood a moment before, was a tall, gangling, sunken-cheeked soldier through whom I could see

nothing.

He turned, cupped his mouth, and called, "Criminy, Sarge! There's

someone

alive down here!"

I later found out he was one of a hundred troops of the 138th Regiment

of

the 35th Division, who had arrived on the scene a good ninety minutes faster than I had expected. The German resistance just seemed to melt away, they said. Good thing, too: My wound turned out to be even more serious than before; I wouldn't have lasted another half hour. My

father

would write to tell me that very day he had been curiously restless,

kept

pace his study, knew something was terribly wrong. But all I knew as

I lost consciousness was Private Angelo's tearful, grimy face. The details of my deliverance came to me later; their implications, later still.

Chaos, as before. Bugles. Police whistles. A haze of gas. A rain of garbage from office windows. Rearing horses. Hundreds of people in the middle of Pennsylvania Avenue, slowing our advance -- running across our path, or clutching at our reins and stirrups, or just standing there dazed. Some were Bonus, I was sure, but which? Screams and curses. A lunch pail bounced off the pavement once, twice, and tumbled away, spraying scraps. Up ahead, through the cherry trees, I could see the Capitol getting blessedly nearer. One of the trees swayed and fell, and a tank trundled into view, lurching upward as it rolled over something. I long had dreaded my return to July 28, 1932. But now that it was here

I was going to do just what I did before, by God: my duty. And, later, something more. Ahead was a streetwide melee, as the infantry steadily pushed the front line of Bonus marchers back toward the Anacostia Bridge. It was no rout, though. These were American vets, all right; they scratched and struggled and threw punches and wrestled the whole way down Pennsylvania. I heard no shots except the thumps of the gas canisters, but I saw plenty of doughboys using the butts of their rifles. No bayonets in use, not that I could see, not yet.

A pack of a dozen Bonus boys, all in uniform, ran toward me. Somehow they had made it past the infantry. Some had bloody faces. Two were waving shovels, and one a crooked umbrella. They looked wild-eyed, crazy. I whistled to the riders on my left and right and we charged. The veterans wheeled so fast they skidded, stumbled, then ran back the way they had come, cursing us the whole way. We swept them along with the flats of our sabers. I gave one straggler a good smack in the pants, and he yelled, "I'm going, General! I'm going! Don't hit me!" General. Promoted by a goddamned Bonus marcher. I slowed to a trot and stared down the crowd lining the sidewalk. What shocked, snarling, hateful looks, what howls and oaths -- as if I were the Lindbergh kidnapper, or Scarface Al. And from Americans! Watching American troops do their duty, sweeping an organized Bolshevik occupation force out of Washington! I was glad to wield the broom -- as glad the second time as the first. A rock, I suppose, struck my helmet, knocked it sideways; I righted it immediately, and kned my horse forward. Ahead, a stray cloud of gas made a hotel awning bulge upward. From beneath it a man in uniform stumbled into the street, holding his throat: a goddamn doorman. A horse reared; its rider yelled: "Out of the way, sir! Out of the way, please!" The doorman staggered to the sidewalk, clawing at his epaulets. Two fat men in business suits grabbed him, hauled him through a revolving door, glared

back at me.

The gas was dissipating quickly in this windy canyon, yet my eyes were streaming. I touched the mask hanging from my saddle, tapped its goggles,

decided against it. Some officers, I knew, had donned their masks before

they were a block from Fort Myer.

Above me, looking down from the office windows, a hundred anguished faces

in a row. "Shame!" cried a woman's voice. "Shame!" I selected a woman in a

wide white hat, saluted her, and rode on.

Coming down a side street toward Pennsylvania was a lone tank, an old Renault. Hadn't that idiot been issued a map? A gang of boys in knickers

chased the tank, hanging all over it, throwing round projectiles that splattered off the plate. Apples. Still in service after fourteen years

--

amazing.

Much later, after the charge across the bridge, after the clearing of the

Flats, after the fire that swept "Hooverville" into ash, after it all was

left to the newspapers and the politicians, I was standing, as before, talking to several of my fellow regimental officers at the picket lines,

when I heard the footsteps on the sidewalk behind me: two men marching smartly, one man shuffling. Once again, without turning, I knew who he was.

In the wards, after Cheppy, I had talked to boys who were bayoneted. They

described what it was like. I had begun to feel something similar whenever

I thought of Private Joe Angelo.

I turned to face him. He was the same. His face and uniform were filthy,

matted with grass and mud and flecked with -- blood? Had he been dragged?

The Distinguished Service Cross was in place, though. Crooked, but there.

Runnels of sweat, or tears, had smoothed the dirt on his cheeks. I couldn't meet his gaze, God help me, not yet. Never noticed before how bowlegged he was, I'll be damned; in Virginia they'd say you could throw

a

hog through his legs.

"Major Patton," said the sergeant at his right elbow, "this one says he knows you, won't come quietly until he speaks with you -- begging your pardon, sir," he added, misreading my expression.

Before, my shame had turned to embarrassment and anger. I had snorted: "Sergeant, I do not know this man. Take him away, and under no circumstances permit him to return!"

And then I had turned my back on Joe Angelo, who did not speak, and who went so quietly that I heard nothing as I stood there chatting with my fellow Cavalry officers about what a sad spectacle it was, a damn good enlisted man gone to rack and ruin, hat in hand with the Bolsheviks,

each

word welling up like acid in my throat.

Not this time. But the hell of it was, as I stood there, looking at Joe Angelo again, knowing this was my second, perhaps last, chance, I felt those very same words roiling out; I very nearly said them. "Sergeant --

I

mean, I -- " I had to clench my jaw, get hold of myself (discipline or death, Georgie, discipline or death), force myself instead to say the words I had practiced so bitterly, so often.

"I do know this man, Sergeant." Damn my throat; I was barking like Willie,

Willie who wasn't even born. "This man is Joe Angelo. Fourteen years ago,

Sergeant, in a hole in the ground near a pissant crossroads in France, Joe

Angelo saved the life of a cowboy lieutenant colonel who let himself get

shot in the ass while daydreaming." I twitched a smile, and forced myself

to look at him. I hoped it was a smile. "Hello, Joe. I'm sorry we're on opposite sides today."

I sounded like a Latin-school brat quavering his way through "The boy stood on the burning deck." I could not read the expression on Angelo's face. I had to go on, quickly, before I lost the energy, before the

other

words took over. "And Joe, while I don't agree with your methods out

here

-- all this agitating and public disturbance and socialism and all -- I want you to know that, well, if there's anything Beatrice and I and our family can do to help you out, and your family, then Joe, you only have

to

say the word. I don't hold with handouts, but that, Joe, that wouldn't

be

a handout, that would be -- I'd say that would be something like

justice.

And I'd be proud to do it. We'd be proud to do it. I hope you believe that, Joe." The Capitol seesawed. I fought to stand upright.

Joe swallowed once, twice. Damn, he had to be scrawnier than at Cheppy, else how the hell could he have carried me even a foot? Sawed-off

little

bowlegged runt?

"I do believe it, Colonel." He sounded raspy, too. He cleared his throat,

laughed a little. "I surely do."

I was aware of the officers behind me, staring at my back the same way the

smug bastards used to stare at me at West Point, when I gave the whole parade ground holy hell while they stood behind me and disapproved,

with

their thin lips and their narrow eyes, but had nothing to say. To my

face,

disapproval is nothing, it's dust, it's lint, it's the prick of a

cactus,

but from behind it's a strong enemy hand pushing, pushing. The hell

with

West Point; the hell with them. But the words were harder and harder to say. I thought I was going to choke, or vomit.

"Can't call me Colonel anymore, Joe," I spat out. "I'm a major, now.

Got

busted down after the Armistice. Too many officers." I glanced

sideways.

"More than any sane army needed."

He flashed a smile that did not reach his eyes. "Yeah, peace is hard on everybody, huh, Colonel?"

"Oh sweet goddamn, that's true," I said. "Yes sweet Jesus yes."

"Uh, Major, the truck is waiting -- "

"I just wanted to see you, Colonel." Joe took a deep breath. "I just wanted to have a good look at you. I wanted ... I just wanted ... " He seemed to be having trouble finding words, too. I held out my hand. Would it feel clammy to him? "I'm glad you found me, Joe." He took my hand, held it limply for a second, then let it go. "Colonel,

I

-- "

"Please, come see us in Fort Myer, have dinner with us. Bring your family.

If they're home in -- New Jersey? I thought so -- we'll bring them in, too, on the train."

"Colonel, I want to say -- "

"Take care, Joe."

"Don't worry about me, Colonel. Shit!" He flinched from the sergeant's hand on his shoulder. "Wait a minute. Hey, Colonel. How about this? I got

an idea, see. What do you think of this idea, huh?" As he kept shrugging

off the increasingly insistent guards, tried to wriggle away, he did a sort of shimmy dance, keeping his gaze on me, and talking more quickly,

as

if energized. "When I get out of jail, because I guess I will get out, right? One day. Well, when I do, I'll go on back to New Jersey, back to

my

wife and my kids, no job or nothing, no pension or nothing,

empty-handed,

just good old Joe, good old Dad with nothing in his pockets as usual,

that

is if they're still there, oh Jesus," and his voice broke, "if they're still there waiting on me, waiting on fucking nothing, and then maybe we'll all get together, the Angelos and the Pattons, for a nice little dinner, maybe with caviar and crackers and, and, hell, what do rich

people

eat? Fucking finger sandwiches, but in the meantime, Colonel -- let go

of

me, you fathead son of a bitch -- in the meantime, Colonel, do you know what you can do? Huh? You can go straight to hell! How about that?"

I couldn't speak. I couldn't move. I stood there watching the two sergeants, enraged now, haul Joe Angelo away.

"That a fair deal, Colonel? Huh? That a fair goddamn deal?" He yanked a hand free, ripped off his medal, and flung it at me. It bounced off my chest, I suppose. I didn't feel it, but I heard it plink against a

button,

and then the pavement. "Let go of me. I said I'm going, goddamn you!

For

God's sake! Can't a man walk?"

Muscles taut and aching, forearm barely able to bear the weight, I saluted. I held it after the little man was invisible in the crowd, for

as

long as I could distinguish the sergeants' helmets bobbing. Only when

they

were two bubbles among hundreds did I drop my trembling hand, and then slowly.

I turned back to the officers and croaked, "If you'll excuse me, gentlemen."

They broached goodbyes as I walked away, concentrating: shoulders back, left foot, right foot, left. Alongside the walkway was a waist-high

rail,

flowering shrubs on the other side. Hydrangeas? I gripped the rail for

support as I walked, hauling myself along left-handed. I heard murmurs behind me, something about "the Old Man." Old Man to my soldiers in Mexico at thirty, now Old Man at forty-six, and thirteen years to go -- No! Mustn't think about that. Tendrils of gas seeped out from the shrubs, through the railing, curled around my ankles, made my eyes tear up. I had to say the words, I had to. My throat was on fire. I whispered, fast and desperate, mouth foamy dry. "Sergeant, I do not know this man. Take him away. Take him away, Sergeant, I do not know this man." I passed a flaming barrel. A doughboy fed it leaflets, snatched them one by one from a crumpled bundle beneath his arm.

VOTE THE BONUS
BONUSES NOW
BONUS OR A JOB

The doughboy gave me a queer look. The heat licked my face. I clasped my forehead, forced myself to suck in air. Discipline, Georgie, discipline! Focus! Some changes would be easy, others, not. I knew that. Destiny is hard. Adjusting it is harder. Harder with every passing year. I knew that. I could live with that. Fair deal, Joe, fair deal. "Take him away!" I choked, and kicked free of the clutching gas.

Leave a real Army camp at night, and you can watch it vanish in the rear-view mirror. Even under blackout conditions, there's always something to see. But when I say goodbye to Thomson, and Mims wheels the Mercedes along the gravel turnaround, and Willie scrambles, whining, into my lap, I glance up and I see nothing in the mirror but blackness. Turn your back on it, and all of Fortitude disappears, buildings and tanks and personnel and Thomson too. If only I could forget as easily. It's a long drive back to Peover (who but the Brits would give a town a name like that?), and I don't sleep as well on the road as I used to. That's an understatement. I don't sleep well anywhere anymore. The closer I get to that left-turning truck in Germany ... but no matter. As Willie snores in my lap, sides heaving beneath my crossed forearms, I open my old notebook from Mexico and look at all the items I've crossed off, just to reassure myself that this second life was worth living, that I might avoid that truck yet. My eye lights on the name DICK JENSON and I grin. That's one achievement, surely. On April 1, 1943, a Junker squadron dropped several bellyfuls of five hundred-pounders on the First Armored command post in the Wadi Akarit, north of Ei Hamma. I had been expecting the attack, of course, and I had taken steps to prevent the only casualty. Before, everyone made it to the foxholes OK, but one of the holes suffered a hit -- the one that contained only one man, my young

aide, Dick Jenson, whom I had sent out there, God help me, for some front-line experience. Not again. I made sure Dick was with me all that day, behind the lines, and so I never had to write Dick's mother that letter, and instead of someone else getting killed in Dick's place (which I had half-expected but accepted as a necessary risk), the Junkers didn't do any harm other than rearranging Colonel Benson's furniture, which I'm sure needed it anyway, and giving that nattering old woman Omar Bradley a lingering earache, which is a kind of justice, if you ask me. Got a card from Dick just the other day. He's quite the hero back home, his wife's sulking because all the girls want to dance with him, leg brace or no. Four days after the Junker attack, Dick stepped on a mine outside Sidi-Bou-Zid -- well, actually, the poor bastard to his left stepped on it. We thought that stretch of road had been swept clear, but, what the hell, can't predict everything. Feeling a bit better, I close my notebook, settle back, and peer out the window, where a white stone wall has been twisting alongside for what seems like an awful long time.

Mount Etna was hazy in the distance Aug. 10, 1943, when we skidded to a stop along a muddy ditch outside the 93rd Evacuation Hospital. Why hadn't I just let Sergeant Mims drive past? Had I even intended to call halt, or had it just -- happened? I still didn't have to go in. But the very thought of ordering Mims forward made me feel faint, abruptly feverish. I suppressed a gasp, dug the fingernails of my left hand into the palm of my right until the landscape stopped shimmering. Changing my future had become so difficult, so painful, I had almost given it up. But today I had to do something. I had to. It was a breezy day, and the three-star pennants fluttered nicely even when the jeep was standing still. Someone must have seen them and alerted the receiving officer, a major, who came running, white coat flapping, while I still was in the jeep dithering and taking in the view and feeling grateful that I could regain my strength sitting down. "Yes, General, yes, delighted to have you look around, visit with the men, a great morale-booster, we're very honored ... " Before I followed him in, feeling better but still a little shaky, I looked back at the old volcano and thought, Mims, better you should have driven me to the edge of the crater and over the side. "You'll have to duck your head here, I'm afraid, General. That's right. Attention!" Ah, hell. If I had let Mims drive on by, I'd have been running away from a fight, wouldn't I? And who's to say I wouldn't have run into the same goddamned malingerer, ten miles down the road? No, much better to face my

future, and stand up to it.
Sicily might have been cleaned free of krauts all the way to Messina,
but
as I walked through those canvas wards, chatting and smiling and
patting
boys on the shoulder, I was as tense as I had been during the invasion.
As
if I were braced for one of the patients to lift a pistol and shoot me
where I stood. Goddamn fear! Goddamn nerves!
"How are you feeling, soldier?"
"I'm all right, General. Don't you worry about me."
"Oh, I'm not worried about you, soldier. I'll let the goddamned Huns
worry
about you, when you're back on your feet again with a gun in your hand.
Right?"
"That's right. You tell 'em, General."
More differences. Before, there had been a soldier with staring eyes,
his
face badly burned, who lay on his belly in a cot and kept moving his
arms
and legs as if crawling. "Poor soul kept that up all night," the nurse
had
said. But now I didn't see the wretch anywhere.
"What happened to you, son?"
"Hell, General, I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time, that's
all. The docs are fixing me up, though. I'll be back out there with you
soon."
"I'm glad for that, son. You're a fine soldier, and you and I have a
lot
of killing left to do. You ready for that?"
"You say the word, General!"
"God bless you, soldier."
Others were where I expected them. Here was the poor bastard with his
head
half blown off, who couldn't talk but who reached out to shake my hand
and
then gave me a thumbs-up sign. Here was the nurse who gave me her pan
and
washcloth and let me bathe an unconscious man's fevered forehead. "When
he
comes to, he's never gonna believe it," she kept saying. "Never in a
million billion years." Here was the big nigger comedian, bandaged head
to
foot, who made us all laugh when he said, "Hey General -- You oughtta
see
the other guy."
"God, I love my army!" I said, and those who could cheered.
When I entered the last ward, by now at the head of a little jostling
procession of doctors and nurses, I immediately looked to the bunk where
I
knew the yellow bastard would be. He wasn't there.
Could it be? Would I be spared?
"Where you from, soldier?"
"South Carolina, sir."
"South Carolina, eh? You know, I met a soldier the other day from South
Carolina, and he said a Southern boy could shoot even better than he
could
screw. Do you agree with that, soldier?"
"I'll let you know, General. I need to do a little more shootin'."
"You do that, soldier. You do that." Laughing with the rest, I turned

to
the cot across the aisle.
And there he was.
Different cot, different place in the ward. Otherwise the same.
As before, he wasn't a small man. Not scrawny and weak-looking at all.
Big, hearty fellow. Standing, he'd have been my height. He sat on the
edge
of a cot, feet on the floor. His hands clenched his knees. No bandages,
no
hospital dress at all. He was in full artilleryman's uniform, from
helmet
to boots, every inch regulation. Needed a shave, though. One dark
eyebrow
smearsed across his forehead. His eyes were screwed shut, and his lower
lip
was sucked in. His body was as rigid as if sitting at the trigger,
awaiting an order to fire.
I thought of all I could avoid: the Drew Pearson broadcast, the
headlines,
the demands in Congress for a court-martial
to curse and slap and physically attack a man in his hospital bed, my
fellow Senators, is not the act of a general but the act of a coward
the endless chewings-out from Ike
a miserable coward
and I told myself, let it go this time, Georgie, let it go. Just walk
past
him. Don't even look at him. That's right, Georgie. Just keep on
walking.
The bones in my knees and hips seemed to grind together. I bit my
tongue
to keep from crying out.
I stopped. I turned to him. I fought to keep my voice low, controlled,
polite. Polite!
What did you do in the war, granddaddy?
Kissed all the ass in Europe, honey, Yankee ass and Limey ass, brass
ass
and khaki ass, just like I was told.
"What's your name, soldier? What's your unit?"
His name was Paul G. Bennett. He was 21 years old. Private, First
Battalion, Seventeenth Field Artillery Regiment. Hadn't my family sent
me
all the clippings, for God's sake? But as before, he told me nothing. He
just
sat there.
I reached out -- gently! gently! I pictured Beatrice's neck at sixteen,
the day of the Catalina picnic with the Pattons and the Ayers, the
first
photograph with both of us in it. That's how gently I reached out. My
fingertips rested, trembling, on Bennett's shoulder; I almost stroked
it.
I gave him a push so small it was little more than a mental pulse down
my
arm from me to him. "Hello. Soldier? Can you hear me?"
"Yes, sir," he quavered. His bottom lip, before it vanished again, was
bloody.
"That's a bad lip you got there, son. Is that why you're in here? That
why
you're in the hospital?"
I just want to hear him admit it, I told myself. I just want to hear
him

say he's scared. I want the brave men around him to hear his yellow
mouth.
Hell, the papers said he had begged to stay with his unit, that his
battery surgeon was the one who ordered him to pack it in, sent him to
the
medics. Why didn't he say that? He could if he wanted to. "Hell if I
know
why I'm here, sir," he could say. "Doc said I needed a checkup. I'll be
back out there killing krauts before you know it, General." It'd be so
damned easy. Hadn't he been listening to the others? Didn't he know
what
he was supposed to say?
Bennett -- no, I wouldn't think of his name, he hadn't earned it yet --
the yellow soldier opened his mouth, jaw dropping like a pin had been
removed. It gaped open. I leaned closer. From the back of his throat a
word was welling up, a slight sound like a distant scream or a rusty
hinge. I stooped there, quivering, waiting.
Beatrice wrote me once that when little Georgie was learning to talk,
he'd
get hung up on a word, and he'd stand there holding onto her deck
chair,
mouth open, trying to remember what the sound was, and she'd sit there
in
suspense trying to will him to say something, anything. I never knew
what
the hell she was talking about until that moment, trying to coax a word
or
two out of that yellow rat in Sicily. Different words. Even "Screw you,
General" would have made me happy. Something -- anything!
"It's my nerves," he said.
The same goddamn thing all over again!
"What?" I yelled. "What did you say?" Behind me a nurse gasped.
"It's my nerves, General. I just can't stand the shelling anymore. I
can't." Eyes still shut, he started to cry, with a low and maddening
whine
like Willie at the door, wanting to be let out. A noise fit for a dog.
I knew what I
goddamned coward
wanted to say and needed to say
yellow son of a bitch
and had said before
shut up that goddamned crying
but I remembered the headlines, and the hate mail, and the packs of
reporters pecking at my daughters' windows, and my orders from Ike's
hatchetman to crawl
disgrace to the Army
on my belly to every last unit in the Seventh Army asking forgiveness
back to the front, my man
and then the months of doing nothing, and then finding out that my next
"command"
ought to be lined up against a wall and shot
was to lead a non-existent army in a non-existent invasion -- and that
only because the last person who still believed I could do the job in
combat was Hitler.
No. Not again. Shut up, Georgie.
God damn you
Just shut up.
"I can't," the miserable rat whispered.
I leaned forward farther, gently laid my hands on his shoulders, my
mouth

against his left ear. He flinched, the corner of his mouth jerked, but he didn't resist. His whiskers pricked my cheek. He was a smoker. The pain had returned, spasms in my back, my arms, my legs. Mother of mercy, Georgie, don't fall on the boy. Anything but that. So low that not even the man in the next cot could catch it, in a desperate rush to speak before my voice gave out, I breathed into his ear:

"You worthless, Godless, pitiful, no-dicked bastard, in another lifetime I slapped the living shit out of you, you disgraceful excuse for a soldier. And I'd like to do it again, rather than let you sit here pissing on all these good brave men around you. This time, though, I'm going to walk away from you, the way I'd walk away from a turd I left hot in a ditch, and maybe my life will be the better for it. I don't know. But whatever happens to me, you wretched stinking traitor, I hope what you get is worse."

I kissed his ear, let go of him and jerked to a standing position, wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. He sat there as before, still trembling, but not crying any more. As far as anyone else in the ward knew, I had spoken words of private encouragement -- and by God, I had! Sure I had. More than he deserved. I turned to go. A few inches' movement, but so, so hard. I felt the cords in my neck pull taut, resisting. The pain wasn't the worst of it. Turning my back on that soldier was like turning my back on myself.

"I just can't," he murmured.

Where the South Carolinian had been, lying in the bed in front of me, was my granduncle, Col. Walter Tazewell Patton, a bloody bandage over most of his head but his good eye shining. His Confederate grays were spattered with red and with orange clay. Sitting beside him in a canvas chair, likewise staring at me, was my gray-clad grandfather, George Smith Patton, bandaged hand on the hilt of his saber, splinted leg sticking into the aisle so that I'd have to step over it to reach the door. Across the aisle, with tubes feeding into his arm, lay a centurion, free hand drumming a pursuit rhythm against his breastplate, eyes intent on me beneath the crest of his legion. Beside him lay a huge man in a horned helmet, beard wild and matted around his strapped-on oxygen mask, his great chest rising and falling alarmingly but his face still and sure. All around the ward were men in chain mail, redcoats, bearskins, tricorne hats, all writhing or gasping or clutching their wounds, all staring at me. The nurses were gone. In the doorway where the doctor had stood was my father, in his suitcoat and plaid vest, his pants a bit baggy. He wore a stethoscope and held a clipboard under his arm. His lips were pursed, his eyeglasses low on his nose. It was the expression he used when withholding judgment.

"Not again," I murmured. I closed my eyes and tried to restrain my shudder.

"General? General. Are you all right?"

I opened my eyes. The doctor was back, and the nurses, and the other wounded men of the U.S. Seventh Army. They looked less real than the phantoms had been. They had less life in them, even the ones who weren't

wounded. They were frozen like a medical-school tableau, a closed-down waxwork, waiting on me to do something to get their lives, the war, history, moving again.

I felt nearer death than any of them.

Behind me the yellow bastard sobbed. Bennett. His name was Bennett.

I muttered, "Ah, the hell with it," whirled and slapped the living shit out of him.

Willie trotting at my side, I stride into the St. James Square office of the Supreme Allied Commander, who stands and returns my salute, then leans across the desk, grinning, to shake my hand. So this is going to be one of those across-the-desk things. Willie's leash goes taut as he snuffles the rug, the legs of the davenport, the bar -- all these SHAEF offices are tricked out like a goddamn bordello.

"George, Christ, it's good to see you."

"You, too, Ike, you, too."

I hear a scramble beneath the desk, and a hairy muzzle pokes out, sniffing. It sweeps from left to right like a turret gun. Then it bares its teeth and growls.

Willie stops so suddenly he nearly falls. He whimpers and shinnies backward, huddling against my boots.

"Uh-oh," Ike says. He reaches beneath the desk to seize Telek by the collar. The Scottie yaps and struggles.

"Hang on, Ike. I'll put him out." I scoop the trembling Willie into my arms -- Jesus! How heavy do bull terriers get, anyway? He's harder to lift all the time -- and turn to the door.

"No, don't bother, George, Willie can stay. I'll put Telek out."

"No, no, Ike. Telek outranks Willie. Besides, this is Telek's home. Protocols, eh? Mims! Thank you. Now, Willie, don't take on so, I won't be long, go with nice Sergeant Mims, Sergeant Mims will give you a treat.

You did bring the treats, didn't you, Mims? Good man. That Mims is a good man," I say, as I close the door, leaning on the knob for support, and turn back to Ike. He is reassuring Telek, who has disappeared beneath the desk again.

"Have a seat, George." He jerks a hand in the general direction of the hideous armchair -- Are all the man's gestures awkward? -- and, instead of

crossing to the davenport, or to the other armchair, sits at the desk and rummages papers. Fine.

"Thank you, sir," I say. Seating myself, determined not to show my relief

at sitting down, I cross my legs at the knee and fold my hands in my lap.

Ike looks up and blinks his huge, bright eyes.

"Oh, come on, George, relax a little. Take your helmet off, at least. The stars are shining in my eyes. Heh."

I lift it off, set it in my lap, smooth my hair, and fold my hands atop the helmet. So tired. Good thing no one could doze off in this upholstered torture device.

"Juice? Soda water? I'm told there's real lemonade today. A convoy got through."

I glance at the ice bucket, the tumblers, the amber decanter that sparkles in the lamplight.

"No, thank you," I say, my mouth dry.

"Trip into town go all right?"

"Just fine, Ike. No complaints."

He fusses with his papers again. I need something to focus on, so I study him. If he were going to chew me out for something, he'd have started already, would hardly have let me get in the door. If he were going to go over plans, discuss Third Army's progress, update me on the war news, he'd have waved me over to the map, talked a blue streak; he loves organization, he lives for chalk talks and pointers. Hell, if he just were feeling lonely at the top again, Miss Summersby indisposed or something, he'd have sat on the sofa -- or come out into the countryside to see me, not called me down to this damned fancy house.

"Do you want anything to eat, George? I could have something sent up. I can't remember what we had tonight. I think it was just bangers again --

I've somehow got to get an American cook assigned here without splitting the Alliance -- but hell, bangers would be better than nothing." I haven't eaten in days. My gorge rises at the thought of chewing, swallowing. I'll avoid the question with a joke. "In America," I say, "we call them sausages, Ike."

I grin, but that was a cheap shot, and we both know it. He pulls off his spectacles -- always a laborious task with Ike, who unhooks first one shank and then the other, frowns that great flat face as if his ears were coming off with them -- and then looks at me without expression, tapping the spectacles on the blotter.

"I know what you call them in America, George." He winces. "What we call them. Shit."

I suppress another grin. "Sorry, Ike. Just a joke."

He tosses the spectacles onto the desk. "Goddamn it, George, I didn't bring you in here for you to give me another lecture about kissing British ass."

"I'm curious to hear why you did bring me in here, Ike."

"Maybe I just wanted to have a pleasant visit with my oldest friend in the Army. Maybe I just wanted to stay up all night shooting the shit like we used to do."

"That would be great," I say, "maybe. And maybe what else?"

He sighs, twists his mouth sideways, as if he had bangers in his teeth.

"George, I'm worried about you."

This is new. "Worried," I say.

"Look at yourself, George. You barely can carry your medals around.

Your

uniform hangs on you like an empty tent. You walk like a colored man in

a

zombie movie, and your eyes are a snowman's buttons. How much sleep

have

you been getting lately? Christ, even a Sherman has to be serviced now

and

then." He glances at the bar, and I follow his glance, then look back

to

see him staring at me. "George, for God's sake, you haven't -- "

It actually has been a good day, considering; I haven't felt any pain since lunchtime. Until now.

"Ike," I say.

He sighs again and folds his arms, leaning on his elbows. He studies

the

paper-strewn desktop. "All right, George, I'm sorry for asking. I know

you

swore it off. But goddamn it, George, I've known you for twenty years,

and

I can tell when something's the matter. Now, as your friend and your commanding officer -- the only goddamn commanding officer you have

between

here and the Potomac -- I've got a right to know what it is."

I shrug and flap my hands, make a show of gruff nonchalance, despite my growing unease. "Sure I'm tired, Ike, we're all tired. We'll all be

tired

until we've swept the Nazis out of Europe, and then we'll all have to

go

to the Pacific and be tired there, too. Hell, no one's any more tired

than

you are, Ike. The question is, whether my being tired is impairing my efficiency as commander of Third Army. Do you have any signals that it is?" A note of generous cooperation might be helpful here. "Because if

you

do, Ike," I continue, voice chirping as I suppress a cough, "I want to hear about it straight up, straight from you -- as my friend and as my commanding officer."

The wall map behind Ike boasts a snarl of red arrows through France.

None

follows the straight, ancient roads that William the Conqueror used.

The

map in my own office is different.

Ike shakes his head, flips through a thick sheaf of reports, many of

which

bear my signature. A show of busyness; he hasn't put his spectacles

back

on. "No, George, no I don't. In fact, I hear nothing but glowing

reports

from Peover. All the equipment and personnel coming in on schedule, absolute secrecy at all levels, the training going well -- hell,

George,

you could train Veronica Lake to be a tank commander if you had to, everybody knows that. No, those boys won't be green long. I presume

you've

got the usual bitching about the helmets and neckties, eh?" He looks

back

up, closes the folder, lets his fingertips rest on it, his hand
crouched
like a spider. "Any other problems in Peover that I should know about?"
I laugh, give him the million-dollar grin. "Well, Ike, the men at
headquarters are having a bit of trouble pronouncing the name of their
town. Instead of 'Peever,' they keep saying 'Pee-over,' and so now a
lot
of them are calling it 'Piss Over.' Maybe it'll catch on, and the Brits
will have to change their maps." He's not laughing. "Other than that,
no,
Ike, I'm real proud of everyone in Third. No real killer instinct yet
in
many of them, but that will come, that will come. Walker in particular,
he's doing a fine job with Twenty Corps."
"Yes, yes, it's in the reports. Glad to hear it." He reaches out for
the
spectacles, and my gut clenches. "But I see other reports, too,
George."
He hooks his spectacles back on, pulls from beneath a stack a lavender
folder that's unfamiliar to me. He opens it and leafs through it, which
doesn't take long, as it only contains a few sheets of paper, typed,
single-spaced, and unsigned but stamped with an unfamiliar seal. "And
those reports are a bit more ... well, I guess perplexing is the word
for
what these are."
"What do you mean?" I ask. Suddenly it's stifling in here. I want to
mop
my forehead, but I don't dare. This is bad. This is very bad.
He scratches his head and squints. "Fortitude, George. Operation
Fortitude. The fake invasion of Calais, the one we're feeding the
Germans.
Now, initially, George, I recall you weren't thrilled about your role
in
that. 'Goddamn figurehead,' those were your words, I believe."
My knees are beginning to ache again. I shift, and that lousy armchair
makes farting noises. "In the heat of the moment, I may well have said
something like that."
"I'm sure of the 'goddamn,' at any rate. But you seem to have become
wildly enthusiastic about this fake invasion headquarters the movie
studio
built in East Anglia." He traces the lines of type with an index
finger.
"Why, in the past few weeks alone, you've been out there ... twelve
times.
You were there on the 17th, the 20th, again on the 23rd and 24th -- you
stayed the night that visit, George ... "
I once saw Ike sit between two chattering machine guns on a practice
range
while working out tactical problems with a stubby pencil. He certainly
isn't going to let himself be distracted by me -- but I try for
heartiness
anyway. "You ought to come out there with me sometime, Ike." I slap my
thigh. "It's a remarkable setup, just fascinating."
"It certainly fascinates you, George. The 28th, the 30th ... George, I
know we asked you to be seen in that area occasionally, but two or
three
times would have sufficed." He clears his throat, rubs his jaw. "And
then
there's the matter of your behavior on the site."
Something is rubbing my boot. Telek. The Scottie sniffs around my feet,

then sits up and cocks its ears, trying to be adorable. "My behavior," I say, thinking fast. "Assigning rank to all the civilian workers. Requiring them to adhere to military codes of dress and deportment. Hagglng over blueprints. Making demands that are, at the very least, strange. I mean, really, George. Unused roads must be kept in top repair. Unused airfields must be graded once a week. The hospital must be enlarged to accommodate expected ... casualties? George, that hospital's an empty shell." He looks at me, expressionless, sucks the corner of his mouth a moment. I reach to pat Telek, who shies away with a whimper. My hand is left groping at nothing. "It's all part of the deception, Ike. If that camp isn't convincing on the ground, it won't be convincing from the air." "Uh-huh. Talking to yourself, George -- is that another part of the deception?" Now I'm cold, but sweat is trickling into my left eye.

Ike's tracing finger begins tapping the page, with an increasingly staccato rhythm. "Roaming the grounds all night, muttering to yourself, or to somebody. Addressing soldiers who aren't there. Dressing them down, giving them pep talks." Thomson. What a fool I've been. Always stepping out from behind something, surprising me. Always wanting to tag along, show me new things. Always so attentive to everything I say and do, as if she privately admired me, as if she were storing up information to share with her friends. "I'll be goddamned," I say aloud. "A spy." Ike sighs and says, "Oh, come on, George, Fortitude is an Intelligence operation. They're all spies, or they wouldn't be there." He sits back, laces his fingers across his stomach, what there is of it. His chair moans softly. "At any rate, this report tells me what you've been up to during your off hours. Running the real Third Army by day and the fake First U.S. Army Group by night and running yourself into the ground in the process. My question, George, is still: Why? What the hell's going on?" He waits. "Please tell me you've got something going with the Thomson woman, and she's so good that you see visions afterward." I make a contemptuous noise in my throat. One of the first things I wrote down, that night in Mexico, was BEATRICE and I've done right by her this time, by God; I've made sure of that. My conscience is clear on that score. What I say is: "That's a bit personal, Ike." "Shit," he says, flat and commanding, as if he had said, "Fire."

Another bad sign. He continues: "When one of my top officers begins to display every sign of confusing fantasy and reality, that's gone way beyond the personal." He rocks in his creaking chair. "Talk to me, George. I'm serious. Talk to me, or I'm liable to forget I'm your friend, and

remember

I'm the guy in charge of seeing that Operation Overlord doesn't fall apart

before we reach Paris, much less Berlin."

"Goddamn it," I say, standing up. My helmet hits the floor, rolls. Too fast; a wave of dizziness as I lean both fists on the desk. Ike sits

there

like a Buddha. "That's just it, Ike."

"What's it?"

"Overlord. Put me in it, Ike."

Now, for the first time, he looks tired, too. "Oh, for -- "

"Monty and Bradley don't know what they're getting into, no one does,

but

I do, Ike, I know what needs to be done -- "

He shakes his head, stares at the wall. "I don't believe this."

" -- you know and I know that if the troops in Normandy get bogged down behind those hedgerows, we'll have a real risk of trench warfare on our hands. The goal shouldn't be capturing territory, it should be killing Germans." With a burst of energy that's almost painful, I bang the desk with my fists. "Sir," I add.

Ike shoves his chair back and stands, running his hands over his head

as

if polishing it. "No," he mutters. "No, no, no, no, no."

"Ike, I've been sending you papers, proposals. You've read them."

"Yes, George, read them and re-read them and shook my head and put them

in

the file of old business. Old business, George." He thumps the wall map with the side of his fist. "In case you hadn't noticed, our invasion

plan

has already been decided."

"Ike -- "

He keeps thumping the map, punctuating his points. Another damned chalk talk. "I mean it, George. Overlord is workable, it will succeed, and

it's

the only one all the Allies agree on -- all, George. Now I know you're pissed off that you have to sit here in England with Third until the beaches are held, and I sympathize, but George, that's how it's going

to

be. After that hospital business in Sicily, you're lucky to be in

charge

of anything and crossing the Channel at all, and you know it." He takes

a

deep breath, closes his eyes, and rubs his forehead. "My God, George,"

he

says, more quietly. He chuckles, eyes still closed, and shakes his

head.

"I swear. You act sometimes like one of those tent evangelists, like

Aimee

Semple McPherson with a pipeline to the heavens. Like you can wave your hands and call down the angels and have them whisper in your ear

exactly

what we all ought to do, and exactly how this war is going to turn out."

He starts to say more, but something, a thought, a realization, stops

him.

He opens his eyes. We stare at each other across the desk. Ike blinks, opens his mouth, closes it again.

It is small of me, I know, but I cannot restrain a surge of pride. How many years has it been since I last saw Ike afraid?

He puts one hand to his forehead. The hand trembles. "Jesus Christ," he murmurs, still looking at me.

"Now, Ike -- "

top
"Hang on, George. Hang on a second." He turns to the bar, wrestles the
off the ice bucket, and begins flinging cubes into a tumbler.
it,
"Ike, listen to me." I reach up to grab his shoulders, think better of
falter. "There's something I should have told you years ago."
I have never told anyone, not even Beatrice, not even Papa -- the real
Papa. Not anyone.
"I've lived all this before."
Drink in hand, his back to me, Ike straightens. The ice chuckles in the
glass.
"You see, I know how things are going to turn out ... or, at least, how
they're likely to turn out ... and so I know, better than anyone else,
Ike, how risky Overlord -- "
Ike turns, tumbler to lips, and holds up one index finger for silence.
Usually this means the fuse is lit. I shut up and grit my teeth. He
gulps
his drink, then lowers it. He keeps the finger raised.
one
"First of all, George," Ike says, very quietly, "I don't want to hear
more word, tonight or ever, about all this psychic reincarnation
mumbo-jumbo, or I swear to God your war is over."
"Ike -- "
me,
"I mean it, George. Second. No more complaints about Overlord. Not to
not to anyone. Hear me, George?"
I swallow, hang my head, look as contrite as possible. So tired, and so
much to do. "I hear you, Ike."
"Third." He swigs his empty drink, gets a mouthful of ice, talks around
it. "I want you to lay off Fortitude. It's a wonderful deception,
George,
it
but that's all it is. A deception. A fake. A Quaker cannon. Don't take
seriously. It'll make you crazy. OK? OK? George?"
May the God of war and all my ancestors and all the soldiers I have
been
and am, be with me now, and always.
"George. Are you listening, George?"
under
I look up, try to grin. "Yes, Ike. Perfectly. I've been -- I've been
stress, you know." I choke out the words. "Just like Sicily. But I'll
get
hold of myself, sure I will." I pat his shoulder, as awkward as Ike
himself. "You can count on me." I clear my throat. "Anything else?"
My destiny depends on how convincing that was. It didn't sound very
convincing to me.
times,
"Yes," Ike said. He sighs and leans against the bar, his shoulders
drooping. "You can have a drink with me, and we'll talk about old
and you can try to persuade me that this lousy job won't cost me all my
friends. What'll you have?"
will
Swallowing my exultation, I say, in a smooth, even voice: "Lemonade
be fine, Ike. Just fine."
in
Much later, on the way out, down marble stairs and along carpeted
corridors -- what a palatial warren these Limey offices are -- Ike is
chummy mood, arm around my shoulders, grinning up into my face like an
elf. I'm not fooled. I know he'll be watching me even more closely than

usual from here on, and that means Marshall and Stimson, too. How many phone calls, how many telegrams, before I'm sent home? So little time. As we reach the lobby, we pause in front of a vast window and watch the fires. People come and go behind us in the echoing darkness, and near the front door, illuminated by the flickerings outside, I see the shapes of Willie and Sergeant Mims, also watching. I long to get back in the Mercedes, to have a couple of hours' rest, just sitting down, but I stand as upright as possible. Wouldn't do to let Ike support me.

"George, do you remember Camp Meade?"

"I sure do."

"Hard to believe now that we once were so bored, we'd drive through the countryside armed to the teeth and hope robbers would jump us. Do you know, George, I still wish they had."

"So do I, by God, so do I."

"At least then we'd have accomplished something in that do-nothing assignment."

"But we did, Ike. Remember? We proved that if we had to, you and I could take a tank apart and put it back together again single-handed. And I bet we're the only two generals in this whole miserable war who can say that."

"That's right. By God, I had nearly forgotten! You and me in the garage the whole damn weekend. I never thought we'd be able to do it, George, but goddamn if you weren't right, as usual. Every last nut and bolt back in place."

"We were nothing but grease from head to toe, a couple of Jolsons."

"And when we were done you made a big show of being horrified and pulled that big old washer out of your pocket -- said, 'Oh, shit, we forgot one!'

For a second I believed you. Nearly wet our pants laughing."

"Nearly?"

"Almost got killed fooling with those tanks, George. You remember when that snapped cable went whipping past our heads, and cut down those saplings behind us?"

"Hell, yes, I do. Scared the shit out of us, didn't it?"

"George." His voice is different. His face is grim in the firelight. He nearly whispers. "When I look at you now, George, do you know what I think of? I think of that cable. Snapping."

We stare at each other for a second or two. Then from across the lobby comes a terrible burst of snarling. Sergeant Mims and a couple of MPs are dancing in a circle, waving their hands and yelling, while at their feet is a roiling, yipping mass of fur and teeth.

"Aw, shit. Telek!" Ike yells.

"Willie!"

The dogs might have killed each other already, if it not for the parquet floor. No traction. Willie a fighter! I can't believe it. Ike and I holler and curse and snatch at their collars but can't grab hold. WACs and staff officers come running from all the doorways and gather around and add to

the din. The ruckus rebounds off the vaulted ceiling. Finally Sergeant Mims grabs a William Morris vase and empties it on the mutts, flowers and

all. A good man, Sergeant Mims. Ike and I seize the chance to lunge, and

soon both of us have an armload of wet, scrambling dog. A few damp daisies

droop from Willie's ears like a garland. Ike has his hand clamped around

Telek's muzzle, but I let Willie bark, and bark, and bark, the echoes sounding like an army of terriers pouring through the building, converging

on the entryway from all directions.

"Sorry, George," Ike says, loudly. "I must have left the door ajar. No harm done, I hope."

"Harm done? Ike, I'd say this is Willie's finest hour." The pain hasn't entirely gone, but I feel energized again, rested, rejuvenated. I beam at

everyone. "Did you see the little bastard go? Did you see him? I'd say he

was getting the best of it, what do you all say?"

A general murmur of cautious assent, with wary glances toward the Supreme

Commander, who grins and says, "I think you're right, George, Willie won

this round. But maybe we can keep the fighting to a minimum from here on

-- right, George?" His grin doesn't extend to his eyes. I beam at him, too.

"Ike, if even my Willie can become a fighter, then who knows? Anything might happen. Anything at all." I kiss the sodden, yipping mutt on the top

of his head. The bystanders applaud. Whew! What a smell. I kiss him again, hard.

I shuffle as fast as I can along the main road through the camp, trying not to pass out. No lights, except a couple of feeble dim rectangles in the black bulk of the main construction shed. I left my flash in the car;

no need for it. I know my way well, and soon we'll have lights enough. As I pass the shed, I hear the erratic heartbeat of a hammer. All across

the camp, tents snap and thump in the ocean breeze. Behind me, gravel grinds beneath the Mercedes as Mims rolls forward, headlights off, tailing

me with gravity. Otherwise, silence.

It's tempting to think that I am the only person abroad in the camp, in the British Isles, in the world. But I know I'm not. I can't take refuge

in that fantasy. My senses are too acute. I hear small murmurous movements

in the shadows that I know aren't hedgehogs. I begin to smell, not sawdust

and turpentine, but grease and gasoline. I know a flashlight beam would pick up, all around me, the gleam of rivets and steel. I try to hang onto

the sensation, firm up the silhouettes, people the darkness. It's a queer

feeling, doing all my seeing with the corners of my eyes. But it's what

I've been doing for weeks now, and I'm getting good at it. Tonight, God
of war willing, it pays off.

I think often about September 26, 1918, the start of the Meuse-Argonne offensive, when a hundred troops of the 138th Regiment of the 35th Division appeared ninety minutes sooner than previously, and saved my life. For years, I pondered their timely appearance. Happenstance? Just one of countless small, random differences between lives? Or was I partially responsible for those men? In my pain, in my despair, in,
most of all, my knowledge of what should be, had I somehow ... summoned them?

Once I began thinking in this way, I couldn't stop. I filled notebooks. Take the unexpected sniper on that Mexican rooftop. If he had lived to croak out his story, what reason would he have given for being up there,
a for not riding out with the other bandits? Perhaps he wouldn't have had a reason. Maybe he just felt compelled to be there. Compelled by what, or whom?

And Thomson. Well worth thinking about, Thomson was. A real asset to Fortitude, yes. That's probably her in the shed now, burning the midnight oil. Damn glad to have her, even if she is a Limey spy. But where did Thomson come from? How did she wind up in charge out here, instead of that hapless Cockney I dealt with before?

Then there was Joe Angelo. Unlike Thomson, he was someone I knew, or thought I knew. But in Washington that bloody day he was different. The previous Joe never would have said those things. But the previous George Patton never would have said what I said, either. Was one difference the chicken, the other the egg? To what extent did I create that different Joe?

In everyone's life there are crossroads, moments of decision, however insignificant. To spot the crucial moments in his life, and act, makes a great soldier. To spot the crucial moments on a larger scale, a grand scale -- that's the work of a general.

Maybe going through life a second time ... disturbs things. Throws up sparks. Creates turbulence. Maybe the identical set of circumstances can't be duplicated, because it would violate, say, some universal law. So my surroundings get rearranged in new patterns, new circumstances. New people. If I couldn't remember my previous life, I'd never realize I had this power. I'd be as dumb as I was the first time through. Even with my memories for comparison, I've been damnably slow on the uptake. Only here, in England, pondering my options, watching Thomson watch me, have I begun to suspect: All this time, without even realizing it, much less using it, I've graduated from merely having visions; I've been creating people out of thin air.

It's an insane idea, yes, but hell, this is war. If insanity works, a general is duty-bound to use it.

But the closer I get to that fatal car wreck in Mannheim, the harder it becomes, physically, to change things. Even an attempted change is hard;

just ask that pissant Bennett. The past few weeks have made me a sick old man. But I won't sit on this rock like a puffin for a second D-day. I won't. I'll get myself a real invasion force, or I'll die trying. There! Wasn't that the sound of a match being struck? A rifle barrel being broken open? A letter from home being unfolded yet again? A can opener working around a hoarded snack of potted meat? A nickel being tossed into the pot? A whisper of conversation between two soldiers who can't sleep? Whatcha thinking about?

Nothing. Home, I guess. You?

Nah. Just my girl. She's in New York.

That's home, too, I guess.

Yeah. Smoke?

Sure.

As I pass, something thrashes in the tall grass of the ditch, skips away across the road, between the tanks. I don't look to see what it is, but surely wild creatures wouldn't venture inside an active Army camp. Must be my imagination. The wind has picked up, and now I hear whispers on all sides.

Old Man
look
it's him all right
What's up?
better follow
I don't look around as I hear the footsteps behind me, first one set and then ten and then twenty and then many more, walking nearly in unison, crunching the roadway with a quiet, harsh sound. In the center of the camp, the main road intersects three others, and their union is a wide turnabout. Here I stop. I close my eyes and ponder what to say, as the footsteps move to surround me. Normally, on the eve of battle, I do this in the daytime, with a battery of microphones and loudspeakers and a hillside full of troops like the Sermon on the goddamn Mount. But nothing's normal about this operation, is it?

Someone coughs, and then someone else. Enough. Time to get started, or I've lost them. If an army isn't inspired, it's nothing.

"Men," I say.

Even without amplification, my voice carries. All is silent again. As I speak, I keep my eyes shut.

"You've heard what Ike and Bradley and all the pencil pushers in London and Washington say about you. They say you're not a real army. They say you're nothing but a bunch of fakers. They say there's no fight in you. You've heard all these things, and so have I."

Utter silence. They don't know what to make of this.

"But you know, and you know, soldier, and you and you and you know" -- eyes still closed, I "look" from one soldier to the other, a surefire technique -- "just as I know, that all that talk is nothing whatsoever but bull-shit."

Some whistling, a couple of cheers, applause. The wind is picking up again.

I continue: "And we all know whose opinions really matter, don't we? Who we should pay attention to? Those son-of-a-bitching Germans, that's who."

I start to pace, slowly, crouching to emphasize a point and standing upright again, then wheeling to retrace my deliberate steps. Many hours I've spent at zoos, watching panthers and other hypnotic beasts. "That's right. Those Germans are as clever and as practical as a nest of rats, and they don't waste time with fantasies. They see the truth.

When they look at you, they don't see a lot of fakers. They don't see a laughing matter. They don't see a paper army. No, they look at you, and they look into your eyes and your guts and your souls, and they see who your commander is, and do you know what they do? Do you know what

they're doing right now, in Bitburg and Frankfurt and Dusseldorf and Heidelberg?"

Tell us, General
What are they doing
You tell 'em, General
"I'll tell you what they're doing. They're knocking their knees together

and pissing in their pants and jumping headfirst into ratholes and wailing, 'Goddamn it all to hell, it's that goddamn First U.S. Army

Group and that son-of-a-bitch Patton again!'"
Laughs, shouts, applause, rushing upward like a bonfire freshly caught. "They know we're going to come over there and kick their asses west to east for a thousand miles and hunt them down and kill every last one of them, from the first beachfront machine-gunner in France to the goddamn Fuhrer himself, hiding beneath the seat of the last upright shithouse

in Berlin.'" "Now they're really whooping it up. Hot damn He can put it down there, can't he Tell us, General, tell us Time to quiet them down again, sober them up. I start sneaking glances

at the dark and shifting shapes all around, at cigarettes glowing bright and then dimming like fireflies, at tank guns outlined by the stars. "I know what you men are thinking. You're wondering whether you have

what it takes in battle. You're wondering whether you're going to honor yourself, or disgrace yourself. Honor your country, or disgrace your country."

Mostly silent now. I can hear the faint caress of the surf. "Well, men, I know what's going to happen to each of you, and I'll tell you in advance so that you won't have to worry any more. Each of you is going to fight, and fight, and fight, until there's no more fighting to be done."

Hell yeah!
We'll fight, sure we will
Bring 'em on
"Because you are Americans. All Americans love to fight, and you men

are
no different."
Goddamn, I'm out of practice. My throat's like beef. I raise my voice
to
be heard over the rising tide of approval.
"It is your duty to fight, it is your nature to fight, it is your
divine
destiny to fight, and it is your pleasure to fight, and kill, and keep
fighting and killing until every last Nazi in Europe is dead. And then
it's the goddamn Nazi army that will be a figment of the imagination,
and
not you, because you will have proved yourself real with your sweat and
your blood and your guts."
Now I detect smells, too -- shoe polish and hair tonic and C rations
and
Lucky Strikes and chewing gum and axle grease and old boots and freshly
laundered fatigues and the pungent sweetness of gasoline and tank
exhaust.
I gulp the air.
"The job ahead of you, men, is the biggest job ever undertaken by an
American army, the biggest job ever undertaken by any army in any war.
And
you are ready for it. You may not think you are ready, but I am your
commanding officer, and I am here to tell you that you are. I have
absolute confidence in each and every one of you to do his job and keep
on
doing it no matter what."
Now I'm bellowing to be heard. My knees are weak. God, how I have
needed
this. I step backward a few paces, grope behind for something to lean
on.
"Hell, I might even feel sorry for those poor sons of bitches we're
about
to kill, but they brought it on themselves. Those Nazis started all
this
goddamn son-of-a-bitchery, and by God, you and I as Americans are going
to
finish it."
Pandemonium. I feel the crowd surging around me, hot and close, but I
still can't distinguish faces, individuals, even though my eyes are
wide
open. I back into something smooth and massive: a tank. I lean against
it,
grateful, run my hands along its flank, prick my finger on something,
take
a last deep breath, and raise my hands for order.
Listen up, you bastards
Listen to the General
Ten-SHUN
The racket fades into a murmur, and as I open my mouth for a final push,
I
focus on my smarting finger and realize --
A splinter? From a Sherman tank?
Oh, Jesus, no. Jesus God.
I close my eyes, reach behind me again. The crowd around me, so close,
so
stifling, so ... familiar. And now I smell burning pyres, the reek of
longboats, blood on armor, and a thousand Shenandoah campfires.
Goddamn it, I smell the past. But I don't want the past. I don't want
it!

I want --
Before I can yank my hand away in fear, my fingers brush steel: cold,
riveted. I lift my fingers to my nose, smell metal and oil.
I whisper, "Another chance, Papa," and I crumple to the ground. First
to
my knees, then sideways, no strength left to catch myself. A general
gasp
around me.
You OK, General?
Still with us?
He's a good one, ain't he?
He's gonna let us have it, you watch
Look at him
Here he goes
Spitting dirt, I roll over and try to lift my head. I can't see a damn
thing, just spots before my eyes.
I'd like to be there when Ike gets the news. But maybe it won't be news
to
him anymore, this unexpected reinforcement, this change in plans, this
change in destiny. Maybe, like these men, he knows the voice of
command,
and forgets everything that came before. Because he, like these men, is
a
soldier.
Somehow I manage to shout: "Men!" Then a coughing spasm hits me, and
then,
with my last reserves of air, I continue:
"I tell you the truth tonight when I say that you are the best army,
the
most dedicated army, the most American army, that I have ever had the
privilege of commanding. You, my friends, are that thing so rarely seen
on
the face of this sorry earth -- a real army! And you will continue to
make
me proud, and win victories, and kick German ass, until this war is
over.
Remember. The shortest route home is through Berlin! So follow me, men!
Let's piss in the Rhine, and then go home!"
A tremendous cheer pins me to the ground, gasping, and then I hear a
series of whunts as the floodlights go on, and I feel the light hot on
my
skin like a new sun. I hear a gunning of engines, a storm of voices, a
rush of cracks and snaps like wildfire, as thousands of men lift their
rifles, shoulder their packs, secure their gear. Above me I see only
blackness, but I hear everything. Sergeants bark orders. Convoys of
vehicles snort and spit exhaust as they grind past -- jeeps and supply
trucks and ambulances. Platoons trot alongside. Their packs rustle in
unison, and the running men huff as one, like a steam engine. A
deafening
roar overhead: must be a bomber, low but climbing; a second one, a
third.
Ours. And the tanks! Nothing else like that clanking rattling trundling
growl, that single file column churning the earth in a huge turtle
furrow
leading straight to the sea. By God, I wish I could see it. I want to
whoop, to dance, to find Willie and kiss him again, but I can't even
lift
my head. It lolls in the damp grass. The blades prickle my cheek. I
would
turn over if I could. "Mims," I whisper. Why haven't any of these

goddamned nincompoops picked me up, set me upright? They wouldn't dare leave without their general, start the battle without me -- would they? "Mims!"

Amid the racket -- now melding, tanks and trucks and guns and men, into

a

single featureless roar -- I hear people bustle about me. Strong hands roll me over, and brisk fingers brush the grass and dirt from my face, fingers sharp and stiff as a whisk broom. Someone pants hot, rancid

breath

into my face, then licks my cheek. I immediately feel better. My voice sounds unnatural, raspy, as I say: "Hi, there, Willie, did you miss me? That's the boy. That's the boy."

A Yankee murmur in the background. Mims, conversing with someone. I continue: "Now this, Mims, this looks like a goddamn army, wouldn't

you

say?"

Willie whines and rips the grass, digging in, as someone pulls him

away.

Thomson's voice: "Come away from there, Willie. Come here, you cur. General? General!"

I wish I could salute. "Colonel Thomson," I say.

"Bugger that," she says.

"Now, Thomson -- "

"What the devil is going on here, General?" She's close to my ear,

perhaps

kneeling on the ground. "I demand an explanation, do you hear me? And

what

is wrong with you, Willie? Come here, then. Don't kiss me! Oh,

appalling.

What do you feed him, General, damned souls and fish heads?"

The longer I lie there, surrounded by the rumble of an army on the

move,

listening to Thomson's small struggle in the middle of a war, the more

elated I feel. Can't change everything. Just ask Hitler. So, Fortitude

has

changed, but Thomson is still Thomson. Must be a reason for that. Must

be.

Interesting to find out what the hell it is.

Thomson, on the other hand, is getting madder and madder. "Oh, grin,

grin,

grin away, then. You Yanks are quite the grinners, aren't you? Your

bloody

president is positively sharklike. No, Willie, no, you can't get down, Mims will be back in a minute with a treat. Stay still, you bastard.

You

needn't look so amused, General, I intend to have my answers."

I no longer can distinguish the sounds of the army. Everything that

isn't

Thomson is just a single glorious background noise, like a violent

shore,

and steadily louder. "You'll have your answers," I say. "But it'll have

to

be en route, Colonel. I have an urgent appointment to keep. Mims!"

Thomson, who's in better voice, begins calling as well. "Damn it all. Mims! Mims!"

As she calls, I hear the thunder. Willie whines anew. I hear Thomson

scramble to her feet, and Willie, apparently in her arms, begins to

yelp

in earnest. Calling Mims, Thomson fades, as if moving away, and the

thunder gets louder, like a new radio show fading in and taking the

place
of another. This battle's begun. I squint toward the east, trying to
find
the first faint glimmers of the sunrise, but even the airfield looks
dark
to me. I picture the first wave of naval artillery hitting the ancient
waterfront of Calais, twenty-one miles across the Channel. I picture
the
medieval watchtower slumping into the water, the bricks of the old city
raining onto the cobblestones, Rodin's statue of the unhappy burghers
being pounded into slag. At the end of the great siege of Calais six
hundred years before, King Edward ordered me to put those burghers to
the
sword, then at the last minute changed his mind, told me to sheathe --
But that is in my past. Ahead of me, for the first time in many years,
is
my future.
"Mims!" I shout as the concussions grow louder, mimic my heartbeat.
"Willie! Thomson!"
They can't hear me. Too much racket, of course. Listen to that army! By
God, we've turned this sorry-ass assignment around, haven't we,
Thomson?
We won't be sitting out this invasion, no ma'am! Follow me, men! They
know
who their leader is. The guns are layered in cotton, pound, pound,
pound.
Murdering border bandits. Damn Gila monsters. I salute the jeering
galleries overhead. A rotten pear bursts against my helmet. I've done
my
duty, you hear me, you bastards? How many of you can say the same? You
don't see me getting shot, do you? The bandit looks up from the hood
and
grins. Look at the yellow son of a bitch, look at the crying baby.
You're
going to make something of yourself this time, Georgie, yes you are.
Fair
deal, Joe, fair deal. I can't be still, Ike, for God's sake, don't you
see? You think I can be immobilized so easily? Suspended in wires with
a
hose in my ass and pins in my neck and a spreading brown spot on the
ceiling for entertainment? I won't do it again, Ike, I won't. This is
where I belong, right here, at the head of an army. That's all I want,
all
I've ever wanted, and I've got it. I've done it. I've won. As long as
one
tank is able to move it must go forward. I won't just lie here, I
won't.
Follow me, men. Come on! There's nothing left for you here, nothing, I
tell you, but death in a ditch, and there's no one else to lead you. No
one but Georgie. Follow me, men. We're out of the trenches, and moving
forward. Follow me.

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